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Allegiances

STORMCLAN

LEADER

THUNDERSTAR — a massive gray tom with streaks of silver running through his thick fur and piercing amber eyes. his broad shoulders and powerful build make his a force to be reckoned with in battle, yet his calm demeanor and soft voice set him apart as a compassionate leader

DEPUTY

SHADESTEP — a sleek, black tom with dark green eyes that seem to blend into the shadows of the forest. his fur is short but glossy, and he moves with silent, fluid grace.

APPRENTICE, DAPPLEPAW

MEDICINE CAT

DAWNCLOUD — a young soft cream-colored she-cat with hazel eyes that glow in the sunlight. her delicate build and movements given her an almost ethereal presence often making her seem as if she's part of the forest itself.

WARRIORS

MISTFEATHER — a slender, blue-gray she-cat with soft, feathery fur and pale green eyes. she is known for her elegance and quiet grace, both in movement and speech.

THISTLETAIL — a sturdy golden-brown tom with dark tabby stripes and amber eyes. his tail is unusually bushy, giving him his name. honest and straightforward, he is known for his unwavering loyalty to the clan and dependable nature.

SMOKEFOOT — a broad-shouldered, dark gray tom with striking

yellow eyes and thick fur that protects him in battle. his left ear is torn from a past skirmish.

RAVENFLIGHT — a jet-black she-cat with a single white patch on her chest and sharp, yellow eyes. fiercely loyal and protective, she is one of the best fighters and a natural leader in battle.

SOOTFUR — a young grayish-black tom with white paws and yellow-green eyes. energetic and impulsive, he is known for his unwavering loyalty to the clan.

APPRENTICES

DAPPLEPAW — a dappled brown-and-white she-cat with soft green eyes. she is small for her age, but swift and agile.

QUEENS

CINDERCLAW — a gray she-cat with blue eyes and a singular white paw. calm and assertive, she is anticipating her return to her role as a warrior.

KITS

SHADOWKIT — a dark gray, almost black kit with yellow eyes. eager and excitable, he can't wait to become an apprentice.

ELDERS

STORMWHISPER — a once-beautiful dark gray she-cat with a white muzzle and green eyes that have faded with age. her fur is now thin and patchy, but her spirit remains.

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PINECLAN

LEADER

MAPLESTAR — a sleek, dark brown she-cat with mottled tan and

black stripes resembling the bark of pine trees.

DEPUTY

BIRCHSHADOW — a sturdy, gray tabby tom with dark stripes and striking amber eyes.

MEDICINE CAT

LEAFWHISPER — a small agile cream-and-white she-chat with vibrant green eyes and long, wispy fur.

APPRENTICE, HAZELPAW

WARRIORS

CEDARCLAW — a robust, brown-and-gray tom with thick coat and fierce amber eyes.

SPARROWFLIGHT — a sleek light brown she-cat with soft, dark spots resembling sparrows and bright hazel eyes.

APPRENTICE, RUSSETPAW

DEWMIST — a soft silver-gray she-cat with light blue eyes and a flowing coat.

HAWKTAIL — large, brown tom with sharp yellow eyes and a long, feathery tail.

APPRENTICE, OAKPAW

APPRENTICES

OAKPAW — a small, orange-and-brown mottled tom with bright green eyes and a lively demeanor.

HAZELPAW — a slender, light brown she-cat with darker spots and large, expressive green eyes.

RUSSETPAW — a fiery orange tom with white paws and yellow eyes.

QUEENS

BRIARLEAF — a rugged, dark brown she-cat with bristly fur and bright yellow eyes.

KITS

THORNKIT — a dark brown tabby tom with lively amber eyes.

BARKKIT — a small, skinny brown tom with white paws and green eyes.

ELDERS

EVERGREEN — a sturdy, dark greenish-gray she-cat with mottled fur and kind brown eyes.

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FROSTCLAN

LEADER

ICESTAR — a tall, sleek, pure white tom with icy blue eyes and a long bushy tail.

DEPUTY

BLIZZARDFANG — a large, broad-shouldered gray tom with white patches along his back and muzzle.

APPRENTICE, HAREPAW

MEDICINE CAT

FROZENPETAL — small, silver she-cat with pale blue eyes a sleek coat.

WARRIORS

SNOWSHADOW — a sleek, pure white she-cat with dark green eyes

and long, fluffy fur that helps her blend into the snow.

APPRENTICE, EMBERPAW

STORMSTRIKE — a dark gray tom with piercing amber eyes and thick, wiry fur that gives him a somewhat unkempt appearance.

FROSTWHISKER — a lithe, pale gray tom with bright blue eyes and long, wispy fur around his neck and chest.

HAILFROST — a broad, white tom with silver-gray patches and piercing green eyes.

APPRENTICES

HAREPAW — a lanky, pale brown tom with light green eyes and a long, bushy tail.

EMBERPAW — a small, reddish-brown she-cat with sleek fur and amber eyes that glimmer like embers.

QUEENS

CRYSTALSHINE — a striking white she-cat with long, flowing fur and bright green eyes.

KITS

WINDKIT — a silver tabby tom with striking blue eyes.

ELDERS

FROSTCLOUD — a sturdy, gray-and-white tom with thinning fur and cloudy blue eyes.

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BREEZECLAN

LEADER

WHISPERSTAR — a sleek, silver-tabby she-cat with a slender frame and striking blue eyes.

DEPUTY

SWIFTCLOUD — a lean, long-legged tom with white fur streaked with light gray and a fluffy tail that seems to float in the wind.

MEDICINE CAT

SKYFEATHER — a small, light brown tabby she-cat with bright green eyes and a white chest.

WARRIORS

BARKFOOT — a cream-colored tom with wisps of darker fur along his back and blue eyes.

FALLOWSTRIKE — a small brown and white she-cat with a distinctive patch of dark fur around her left eye and sharp green eyes.

APPRENTICE, POPPYPAW

SPARROWTAIL — a russet-furred tom with a bushy tail and light hazel eyes.

APPRENTICE, DUSTPAW

PINEFUR — a sturdy brown tabby she-cat with amber eyes and a small scar across her muzzle.

QUEENS

RAINPELT — a gentle, silver-dappled she-cat with piercing blue eyes and a calm aura.

KITS

LILACKIT — a gray tabby she-kit with blue eyes.

ELDERS

MUDFOOT — a large, dark brown tom with a white belly and amber eyes that have faded with age.

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WORLD MAP

[image]

Prologue

The icy wind clawed through StormClan's camp, a merciless force that invaded every crevice, shredding through the dens and chilling even the thickest pelts to the core. Leaf-bare had descended with unyielding ferocity, gripping the valley and its surrounding mountains in a relentless hold. Frost encrusted the bramble walls like delicate but deadly veins, glinting faintly under the brittle light of a crescent moon. The ground had turned to frozen stone, muffling even the loudest of paw steps and leaving the camp eerily silent except for the occasional crack of ice along the stone walls that surrounded the camps. The air was sharp and biting, as if nature itself sought to test the resilience of those who called the valley home.

In the medicine den, Dawncloud crouched low in her nest of moss and feathers. The cream-colored she-cat shivered as the cold seemed to creep into her very bones, her hazel eyes clouded with exhaustion. She had layered her nest with every scrap of insulation she could scavenge, but the chill still seeped through, relentless and unforgiving. Her breath rose in faint, frosty wisps, vanishing into the dim light. Dawncloud pressed her paws against her chest, wishing for warmth and comfort that would not come. At time like this, she envied her clanmates in the warriors' den, huddled together in shared warmth. The solitude of a medicine cat's life, a burden she bore with pride, felt heavier during leaf-bare.

Her heart weighed even more than her cold-weary body. Worry churned within her, a relentless tide that no amount of logical thought or prayer to StarClan could ebb. The prey pile was dismal—barely enough to sustain even the two cats that made up the kits and elders. Hunger gnawed at every belly, leaving her clanmates weak and vulnerable. She could already sense the subtle signs of sickness creeping into the camp. The faint coughts, the listless movements, the way even the most resilient warriors carried their heads low with fatigue. And though no one dared voice it aloud, Dawncloud could feel the collective fear in every glance exchanged

between he clanmates. Would StormClan endure this brutal leaf-bare? Or would it be their undoing?

From her vantage point in the medicine den, she could just make out the silhouette of Thunderstar pacing outside her den. The broad-shouldered gray tom moved with a tension that was impossible to ignore, his shadow stretching long against the camp wells. His amber eyes, usually steady and unshakable, not flickered with an uncertainty that mirrored her own. Each decision her made —whether to ration prey, prioritize hunting patrols, or send warriors into the freezing wilderness—seemed to carve deeper lines into his face. Thunderstar was a symbol of strength for StormClan, but even he was not immune to the crushing weight of responsibility.

Dawncloud lower her gaze, her claws kneading anxiously into the frozen moss of her nest. "StarClan," she whispered, "Please, guide me. Guide us all. I don't know how much more my clan can take."

Her plea hung in the air, unanswered. No comforting warmth or divine presence stirred within her. Only the mournful howl of the wind reached her ears, as though mocking her desperation.

Weariness finally dragged her down, exhaustion heavy and inescapable despite her restless mind. Leaf-bare left no room for true rest; it stole warmth, comfort, and peace in equal measure. Yet after countless sleepless night, even Dawncloud could not resist its pull. Her eyelids grew heavy, her thoughts blurring into darkness as an uneasy slumber claimed her at last.

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When Dawncloud opened her eyes, her den was gone. The comforting scent of herbs, the familiar murmur of her clanmates beyond the walls, and the reassuring stone enclosure had vanished. In their place was a boundless expanse of white, stretching endlessly in every direction. Snow blanketed the ground in an unbroken sheet, its surface smooth and untouched as if no living being had ever set paw there. Skeletal trees rose from the frost like blackened claws their twisted branches reaching toward a pale grey sky that seemed both vast and oppressively close.

The silence was suffocating. It pressed against her ears, dense and unnatural, leaving the cream-colored she-cat disoriented. She rose slowly, her paws sinking into the snow with a faint crunch that felt too loud for the overwhelming stillness. Her breath misted in the frigid air, but the chill wasn't ordinary—it was alive, a sentient cold that seemed to watch her every move.

"Where am I?" Dawncloud murmured, her voice fragile, as if afraid to disturb the quiet.

Her paws moved on their own, though every step felt treacherous. The snow gave way beneath her weight, and the ground below whispered faint groans, the telltale song of hidden ice. The first crack came suddenly, a sharp, splintering sound that echoed like thunder in the silence. Dawncloud froze, her fur bristling with unease as dread coiled in her chest.

Then the whispers began.

The were faint at first, barely distinguishable from the wind threading through the barren trees. But they grew louder, sharper, coalescing into a haunting chorus that seemed to come from nowhere and everywhere at once. The voices spoke in cryptic fragments, their tones neither wholly alive nor entirely dead, weaving an eerie melody that chilled her more than the icy air.

"The storm's light will reveal the truth, but beware the danger the walks, hidden in plain sight."

Dawncloud's heart pounded as she whipped her head around, searching for the source. "What truth? What danger?" She called, her voice breaking the oppressive quiet.

The only answer was a flicker of light in the distance. It danced faintly, wavering like a firefly in the gloom, casting ghostly shadows on the skeletal trees. Against her better judgement, she stepped toward it, each movement deliberate, the snow crunching beneath her paws. Beneath the thin layer of snow, the ice groaned ominously threatening to give way.

As she drew closer, the light resolved into a shape—no, a figure.

"Dapplepaw?" Dawncloud whispered, her breath catching in her throat and eyes widening. There, just beyond the veil of frost, stood the dappled brown-and-whote apprentice. Her pelt shimmered faintly, as though woven from moonlight, her soft green eyes scanning the ground with an intensity that suggested she was searching for something unseen. Dapplepaw moved with an otherworldly calm, her paws leaving glowing impressions in the snow that faded moments after she passed.

"Dapplepaw! Wait!" Dawncloud's voice rose in urgency, but the apprentice gave no sign of hearing her. Instead, she padded forward with purpose, her movements deliberate and unhurried.

The air shifted. The forest stirred. Shadows, darker than the deepest night began to slither between the trees like living smoke. They moved with malice, their forms twisting and writhing, coalescing into a predator's shape. The presence circled Dapplepaw, its formless gaze fixed on the apprentice, silent and deadly.

"Run!" Dawncloud called, but her voice was lost to the wind's icy howl. The whispers rose again, louder now, almost a roar.

"Trust will waver. Bonds will break. But the light must endure to save the clan."

The shadow lunged. Simultaneously, the ice beneath Dapplepaw's let out a deafening crack, splitting apart into a gaping chasm. The apprentice turned, her green eyes locking onto Dawncloud's. There was fear in her gaze—but also a glimmer of resolve, a silent message that the medicine cat could not decipher.

Before Dawncloud could react, the vision shattered. Snow erupted around her in a blinding flurry, whipping against her fur and suffocating her senses. The world dissolved into a tempest of white, and she was swallowed whole by the storm.

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Dawncloud jolted awake, her breath coming in ragged gasps as her body trembled uncontrollably. Her nest, carefully woven with moss and feather, felt damp beneath her from sweat, a stark contract to

the icy chill that seeped into the den. Her heart pounded like a trapped bird against her ribs, each beat a reminder of the strange and terrible vision she had just endured.

The whispers lingered in her ears, faint but insistent, their cryptic words circling her thoughts like leave caught in a relentless gale.

"The storm's light.." she murmured, her voice barely above a whisper. Her breath rose in ghostly puffs, vanishing into the cold night air.

Her eyes flickered towards the apprentices' den, a hollow framed with tightly packed brambles and lined with soft moss. Inside, Dapplepaw no doubt slept soundly, her soft dappled fur rising and falling with steady rhythm of sleep. Unaware. Unprepared. The weight of the vision settled heavier on Dawncloud's shoulders. What truth lay buried in its chilling depths? What danger crept among them, hidden in plain sight?

The medicine cat tore her gaze away, unwilling to dwell further on the innocent face of the young apprentice. Her eyes shifted to the shadowed outline of the leader's den, nestled beneath an overhang of stone for shelter. Thunderstar was no longer pacing outside her den, rather she could make out of faint outline of his body in the den. He was the heart of the clan, the anchor they to in times of uncertainty. For Dawncloud, his presence had always been a source of reassurance, a reminder that the clan would endure no matter the hardship.

And yet, not even his steadfast leadership could quiet the dread clawing at her chest now. The words of the vision reverberated in her mind with relentless force.

"The light must endure," she whispered to herself. "But at what cost?"

A gust of wind tore through the camp, carrying with it the mournful cries of the mountains. The bramble walls of her den rustled under its force, the brittle frost clinging to the edges cracking softly. The sound felt like an omen, a reminder of the fragile line between safety and peril that StormClan walked each day.

Curling tightly into her nest, Dawncloud tried to steady herself. She pulled her tail over her nose, seeking any semblance of warmth or comfort. But the chill was not just in her den or in the air—it had burrowed into her very soul, an unwelcome guest that would not leave.

She closed her eyes, willing sleep to return, but she knew it would not. Every time she drifted close to the edge of rest, she saw Dapplepaw again, her glowing paw steps leading into the storm, and the shadows circling like vultures. The vision was burned into her mind, a warning she could not ignore.

The wind howled again, a sound almost like words, though garbled and distant. It weaved through the camp as it it, too, carried a message. Dawncloud's ears twitched, straining to make sense of the phantom sounds.

Dawncloud sighed heavily, her breath shuddering as she forced herself to sit up. If sleep would not come, then she would do what she always did—she would think and she would prepare. The clan depended on her to see through the darkness, to interpret the will of StarClan even when their messages were cruelly vague.

And somewhere out there, in the heart of this storm, lay the truth she would have to uncover before it was too late.

Chapter 1

The sun crept over the towering mountain peaks, painting the rocky slopes in hues of gold and amber as the first light of morning reach StormClan's camp. Its warmth spilled through the gaps in the stone and bramble walls, creeping across the ground to touch the apprentice's den. Inside, a neat nest sat tucked into the farthest corner, where Dapplepaw lay curled tightly, her tail wrapped snugly over her nose. The rays of sunlight caught her dappled brown-and-white fur, given her an almost ethereal glow against the dim shadows of the den.

The air was still sharp with the bite of leaf-bare, and a chill lingered even as the light began to spread. Dapplepaw stirred, her ears twitching as the sun's gentle warmth seeped into her pelt. It was a welcome reprieve form the night's piercing cold, the kind that had crept through the bramble walls and settled in her bones. She let out a small sigh and stretched her limbs, her back arching as she extended each paw. Her claws flexed against the compacted earth of the den floor, leaving faint impressions in frost-dusted ground.

Blinking her soft green eyes open, Dapplepaw squinted against the brightness, her vision adjusting to the golden light that filled the den. For a moment, she remained still, savoring the quiet and the warmth. But the silence wasn't comforting—it pressed against her, heavy and unyielding, a stark reminder of how empty the den had become.

It had been two moons since Sootfur had earned his warrior name, leaving her as the sole apprentice in the clan. At first, she'd been thrilled for her closest friend, her cheers echoing louder than anyone's when his new name rang through the camp. But as the days passed, pride gave way to gnawing loneliness. Nights once filled with whispered jokes and the occasional friendly debating about who had the best hunting crouch were now eerily quiet. She missed the easy companionship they'd share—the way Sootfur's humor could lift her spirits after even the harshest training

sessions.

Her gaze drifted to the empty nests around her, and a pang of longing tugged at her chest. She knew she was being quite dramatic. Shadowkit was to be made an apprentice within the next moon or two and she once again would have a den mate, but she was eager to earn her warrior name.

"I'll join you soon," she whispered to the stillness, her voice soft but resolute. Determination flickered in her chest as she shook out her fur, sending loose moss flying and padded out of the den.

A sharp breeze greeted her, tugging at her whiskers and carrying with it the crisp, familiar scents of the mountains—pine, frost, and the faint, musky tang of prey. The camp was coming to life. Warriors emerged from their dens, their pelts glistening with dew and frost as they stretched and shared quiet morning greetings. The soft murmurs of conversations mingled with the rustle of paws on stone, filling the camp with a sense of quiet purpose.

"Dapplepaw."

The voice, calm and steady, cut through the morning hum. She froze mid-step, her ears swiveling toward the sound. Turning, she saw Shadestep approaching from the shadows cast by the camp's rocky walls. His sleek black pelt seemed to meld seamlessly with the darkness, broken only by the gleam of his amber eyes.

"Good morning, Shadestep," she greeted, dipping her head slightly.

Her mentor was every bit as imposing as the first day he'd been assigned to her. His sharp eyes missing nothing, and his words, though rarely unkind, carried the weight of high expectations. The early moons of her training had been challenging; Shadestep's reserved nature and unrelenting standards had left her questioning her abilities more often than not. But over time, his steady guidance had earned her respect. Beneath the tough exterior was a mentor who genuinely cared, though his approval was hard-won. Their relationship had grown into one of mutual understanding, laced with the occasional thread of dry humor that reminded her he wasn't entirely made of stone.

"You're late," Shadestep said, his tone as even and unyielding as the mountains themselves.

"Sorry!" Dapplepaw said quickly, lowering her head to avoid the full weight of his assessing gaze.

Shadestep's tail brushed her shoulder, a wordless gesture that was neither reproachful nor forgiving. "No time for apologies," he said. "We've wasted enough of the morning already. Let's go."

With a flick of his tail, he turned and began to stride towards the camp's entrance, his movements smooth and purposeful. Dapplepaw hesitated for only a heartbeat before trotting after him, her paws tingling with anticipation of the day ahead. Whatever Shadestep had planned, she was determined to prove herself worthy of his training—and one step closer to her dream of earning her warrior name.

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The forest buzzed with life, a symphony of sounds that filled the crisp morning air. Birds called overheard, their songs a lively counterpoint to the chittering of a squirrel scurrying up a nearby tree. The breeze wove through the branches, settling the leaves into a gentle rustle that seemed to echoe the rhythm of the forest. Shadestep moved through it all like a living shadow, his paw steps eerily silent on the snow-dusted ground.

Dapplepaw followed in his wake, her smaller frame struggling to mirror his effortless grace. She winced as her paw crunched on a stray twig, the sound snapping through the stillness like thunder.

"Quiet your step," Shadestep murmured without breaking stride, his voice low and calm. "A warrior is seen only when they choose to be."

"I thought we were practicing tracking, not invisibility," Dapplepaw muttered under her breath, though she adjusted her gait, carefully placing her paws to avoid the betraying crunch of leaves and twigs.

Shadestep's ears flicked, and he glanced back, a hint of amusement

glimmering in his amber eyes. "You can't track what you've scared away," he said dryly. "Unless you plan on hunting for deaf prey."

Dapplepaw huffed softly, her whiskers twitching. "If they were deaf, at least I wouldn't have to worry about all this sneaking around."

"Ah, but they'd still smell you coming," Shadestep countered, his tail flicking to gesture toward the wind direction. "Or do you plan on holding your breath the entire time?"

She rolled her eyes but bit back a retort, focusing instead on matching his quiet steps. The familiar frustration of her missteps prickled at her pelt, but she took a steadying breath, forcing herself to concentration.

"Patience," Shadestep said, glancing over his shoulder again. The time, his gaze held a faint trace of approval beneath the sterness. "Precision comes with practice. Even I wasn't born knowing how to move like this."

"Really?: Dapplepaw asked, tilting her head. "I thought you were probably born sneaking around and startling your littermates."

A faint smirk tugged at the corner of Shadestep's mouth. "Only when they deserved it," he said, his tone smooth.

Eventually, the pair emerged into the Thunder Hollow, a wide clearing where sunlight filtered through the trees in shifting patches of gold. The open space felt alive with possibility, the ground crisscrossed with faint tracks of prey that had passed through. Shadestep stopped abruptly, turning to face her.

"Today, we focus on stealth and tracking," he announced. "Show me what you've learned."

Dapplepaw squared her shoulders and nodded, determination lightening her green eyes.

The morning passed in painstaking drills. At first, Dapplepaw assumed this was some sort of assessment, but Shadestep's steady stream of quiet corrections told her otherwise. Each misstep earned a critique, and every successful attempt was met with either a curt

nod or the occasional grunt of approval.

"Too loud," Shadestep said as her tail brushed against a leaf, the sound like a tiny alarm in the stillness.

"Balance," he reminded her when her steps faltered. "Your tail isn't decoration; it's part of your movement."

Dapplepaw gritted her teeth against the ache in her muscles, weaving through the brambles with growing confidence. She crept forward, her focus razor-sharp until—

Snap.

The faintest crack of a twig beneath her paw froze her in place. Shadestep raised an eyebrow, his expression unreadable.

"Sorry," she muttered, her ears flattening.

"No apologies," Shadestep said, his tone firm but not unkind. "Learn from it. What could you have done differently?"

"Look before I step," she replied quickly, earning her a nod of approval.

As the sun climbed higher, her movement grew smoother, her steps quieter. By the time Shadestep called for a break, Dapplepaw was panting, her paws tingling and her body aching from the effort. Despite her exhaustion, a flicker of pride warmed her chest when Shadestep finally praised her.

"Better," he said, his voice lighter than usual. "I think you're ready to start learning how to hunt and navigate in the mountains."

Her eyes brightened at his praise, but Shadestep's expression quickly turned serious again.

"Just remember," he contunued, "one lapse in focus can undo everything. You only get one chance to get it right in the mountains."

Dapplepaw straightened, determination hardening her gaze. "I won't

let you down."

His tail flicked against her shoulder, "I'll hold you to that," he said. "Now, let's see if we can put that focus to use and catching something before the sun sets. Or do you need me to scare a rabbit your way first?"

She let out a laugh, her weariness momentarily forgotten. "Only if you can catch it first," she shot back, her green eyes glinting with defiance.

Shadestep's eyes narrowed in mock seriousness. "Careful, Dapplepaw. I might take that as a challenge."

With that, the two set off again, the forest alive with sound as the mentor and apprentice worked side by side, their shared banter carrying on the wind like a melody.

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By the time they returned to camp, the sky was painted in shades of amber and lavender, the sun dipping behind the jagged peaks surrounding the valley. Dapplepaw carried a plump mouse she'd caught on their way back. Her limbs ached from the day's training, but the weight of her catch filled her with pride. The mouse was an important addition to the fresh-kill pile, especially during the harsh leaf-bare moons.

She was heading toward the nursery, where the queens and kits would benefit most form a fresh meal, when a familiar voice rang out.

"Dapplepaw!"

She paused, turning just in time to see Sootfur bounding toward her, his dark gray fur glinting in the fading light. His yellow-green eyes sparkled with mischief, and his whiskers twitched with barely contained amusement.

"What's this?" he asked, nodding at her mouse as he skidded to a halt. "Training again? Let me guess—Shadestep had you stalking leaves all day?"

Dapplepaw set the mouse down with an exaggerated sigh. "Not leaves this time. Invisible prey. I'm convinced he's just inventing challenges to make my life harder."

Sootfur chuckled, the sound warm and familiar. "Invisible prey, huh? Sounds about right. Still, I bet you're better at it than half the warriors already."

She snorted, though her tail flicked with a touch of satisfaction. "Big talk coming from someone who once tripped over his own tail during a hunt."

Sootfur gasped, feigning offense as he widened his eyes dramatically. "That was one time—and moons ago! I'm practically the best hunter in the clan now."

"Right," Dapplepaw teased, her green eyes gleaming. "The best at scaring prey away, maybe."

Their laughter carried across the camp, drawing curious glances from a few nearby warriors. Sootfur leaned closer, lowering his voice conspiratorially. "Careful, or I'll tell Shadestep you need even harder challenges. Maybe he'll have you track snowflakes next."

She swatted at him playfully with her paw. "Don't even joke about that. He'd probably make me do it."

"Well," Sootfur said, grinning as he straightened up, "you're handling it better than I would've at your age. I'd have tried to bury myself in the snow to get out of it."

"You're not that much older than me," Dapplepaw rolled her eyes, but his words warmed her. It was moments like these—shared laughs and friendly jabs—that made the challenges of training worthwhile.

She picked up her mouse again and nodded toward the nursery. "I need to drop this off to Cinderclaw before it gets cold."

"I'll come with you," Sootfur said, falling into step beside her. "I could use a reminder of what real work looks like."

They approached the nursery, where Cinderclaw was curled around a dark gray kit. The gray-furred queen raised her head, her blue eyes softening when she recognized the pair.

"Dapplepaw, Sootfur," Cinderclaw greeted warmly. "You've been busy, I see."

Dapplepaw set the mouse down at the queen's paws. "Thought you and Shadowkit might like this. It's fresh."

"Thank you," Cinderclaw said, her voices filled with gratitude. She nudged the mouse closer and Shadowkit jumped out from behind his mother's tail to sniff the offering.

"It's all hers," Sootfur quipped, motioning toward Dapplepaw. "I can't take any credit—I've just been supervising."

Cinderclaw chuckled. "You? Supervising? That's a first."

"Hey," Sootfur protested, puffing out his chest. "I'm full of wisdom these days."

"Full of something," Dapplepaw muttered under her breath, earning a stifled laugh from Cinderclaw.

As Shadowkit began nibbling at the mouse, Dapplepaw felt a swell of pride. Even the smallest acts of service reminded her why she trained so hard. She turned to follow Sootfur out of the den, but Cinderclaw's soft voice stopped her.

"You're doing well, Dapplepaw. We're lucky to have you."

Dapplepaw blinked, her tail flicking with quiet embarrassment. "Thank you," she murmured, before padding out of the den to join Sootfur outside.

Once they were out of earshot, Sootfur nudged her side lightly. "See? Even Cinderclaw thinks you're amazing. You'll be a warrior in no time."

Dapplepaw's heart swelled at his words, but she masked it with a playful scoff. "If I survive Shadestep's training maybe."

"You will," Sootfur said, his usual teasing replaced with genuine confidence. "And when you do, I'll be cheering louder than anyone else."

Their eyes met for a brief moment, and she let out of a soft purr in response, "Thanks, Sootfur."

"Anytime," he replied with a grin. "Now, let's see if there's any fresh-kill for us."

Together, they padded toward the fresh-kill pile, their laughter once again filling the camp as the sun sank behind the mountains.

Chapter 2

A ghostly mist clung to the rocky terrain of StormClan's camp, the dawn light barely managing to cut through its silvery veil. Tiny droplets of moisture settled on Dapplepaw's fur as she padded purposefully across the clearing, her breath rising in faint clouds in the chilly air. A bundle of fresh moss hung from her jaws, its earthy scent mingling with the crisp morning breeze.

Her muscles ached from the rigorous training session she had endured earlier with Shadestep. True to his word, her mentor had begun teaching her how to hunt and navigate the treacherous mountain terrain over the past few sunrises. The rocky slopes demanded more than just swiftness—each step required balance, power, and precision. It was a lesson she was quickly learning, one bruise at a time. But there was no room for complaints. Apprentices were expected to push past their limits, to grow stronger with each hardship.

As she made her way toward the elders' den, she left her gaze sweep over the camp, taking in the quiet activity around her. Warriors murmured in low voices near the entrance, their expressions unreadable in the mist. Shadowkit, his dark fur barely distinguishable against the frost-dusted earth, tumbled through the snow as his mother watched with amused patience.

Yet despite the peaceful morning scene, an undercurrent tension hung in the air, invisible yet unmistakable.

Dapplepaw's ears twitched as a sharp voice, low and agitated cut through the murmurs of the waking camp.

"...I'm telling you, PineClan's been sniffing around Silver Falls," Smokefoot growled.

Dapplepaw slowed, her paws faltering. Her chest tightened with curiosity, her earlier fatigue momentarily forgotten. Without thinking, she set the moss down beside her, her movements careful

and deliberate as she edged toward the sound of voices. The mist curled thick around her, a natural cloak for her presence. She crouched low, ears straining to catch every word.

"Those tracks could mean anything," came Mistfeather's calm, measured response. "Jumping to conclusions won't help anyone."

"They've done it before," Smokefoot snapped, his frustration bleeding through every syllable. "Fresh tracks. More than just a patrol—this wasn't random."

Dapplepaw's heart pounded. *PineClan? Near Silver Falls?*

"Tracks aren't proof of an invasion," Ravenflight interjected, her voice sharp and level. "Maplestar may be bold, but PineClan wouldn't risk a border skirmish over Silver Falls—at least, not without provocation."

"They'd risk it if they thought they could take us by surprise," Smokefoot countered, his voice dropping lower, almost conspiratorial. "We can't wait for solid proof. If they move before we're ready, we'll lose more than just Silver Falls."

A cold prickle ran down Dapplepaw's spine. She clenched her jaw, her mind racing with possibilities. Was PineClan planning something? What would StormClan do if they were?

She barely noticed the faint crunch of approaching pawsteps.

"Enjoying yourself?"

The voice was calm, yet the pointed edge behind it made her jump.

Dapplepaw whipped around, her fur fluffing in alarm. Stormwhisper stood over her, amber eyes sharp with quiet disapproval. The elder's graying pelt was sleek despite her age, her posture steady and imposing. Her tail flicked once, a silent command.

"I—I wasn't—" Dapplepaw stammered, her pelt burning as she scrambled to find an excuse.

Stormwhisper tilted her head, waiting with a patience that was somehow more unnerving than outright reprimand.

"Eavesdropping rarely leads to anything good," she said finally, her tone firm but not unkind. With a flick of her tail, she gestured for Dapplepaw to follow.

Guilt clawed at Dapplepaw's belly as she snatched up the discarded moss and hurried after the elder. The weight of Stormwhisper's steady gaze made her fur prickle, but she forced herself to keep pace, her steps stiff with embarrassment.

"Weren't you?" Stormwhisper said, arching a brow. "It seems to me that creeping toward the warriors' den, hiding in the mist, and straining to hear a private conversation suggests otherwise."

Dapplepaw winced. She lowered her gaze, but stubbornly, she refused to let her ears flatten. "I just... I wanted to understand what's happening," she admitted, her voice quiet but firm. "Smokefoot sounded worried. If something's wrong, I want to know."

Stormwhisper studied her for a long moment, then sighed, the sharpness in her gaze easing slightly.

"Curiosity is natural," she conceded. "But listening to fragments of a conversation doesn't mean you understand the full picture. Acting on half-truths can be dangerous—for you and for the clan."

Dapplepaw swallowed, her claws flexing against the frost-hardened ground. "I wasn't going to do anything," she murmured. "I just wanted to help."

Stormwhisper's expression softened, but her voice remained steady. "Help by focusing on what you *can* control. Your duties. Your training. That's how you become strong, Dapplepaw. Let the warriors handle what's beyond your reach—for now."

Dapplepaw hesitated, her tail-tip flicking restlessly. "But what if one day... the clan *needs* me, and I'm not ready?"

Something flickered in Stormwhisper's gaze, a quiet understanding.

She lowered her voice, the usual crispness tempered with an unexpected warmth. "Then you will rise to the challenge when the time comes. But readiness isn't just about knowing things—it's about patience, trust, and preparation. Becoming a warrior is not a matter of rushing toward danger. It's about knowing *when* to act, and *why*."

Dapplepaw looked up, the elder's words sinking in like stones in a still pond. Slowly, she nodded, feeling the weight of the lesson settle in her chest.

"Good," Stormwhisper said briskly, turning toward the elders' den. "Now, since you have so much energy for listening, put it to better use. I am in need of fresh bedding."

Despite herself, a small smile tugged at Dapplepaw's lips. She picked up the moss once more and followed Stormwhisper into the den, her earlier worries still lingering but no longer clouding her focus.

There was so much she didn't know. So much she *wanted* to know. But for now, she would take Stormwhisper's words to heart.

She would train, she would learn, and when the time came—when her clan *did* need her—she would be ready.

Chapter 3

The moon hung in the sky, its silvery glow spilling over the forest and casting long shadows beneath threes. The crisp night air nipped at Dapplepaw's fur, but the excitement coursing through her veins kept her warm.

Earlier that evening, after changing Stormwhisper's bedding, she had stood before Shadestep and Thunderstar, her green eyes gleaming with determination. "I'd like your permission to go on a night hunt." She had said. "I want to hone my skills and practice what Shadestep has been teaching me. I promise not to go into the mountains-I'll go no further than the Thunder Hollow and Silver Falls."

Thunderstar had exchanged a look with his deputy before sighing. "You've been an apprentice for more than a few moons now. It might be a good test of your skills. You may go, but be cautious. The night holds dangers even for experienced warriors. If you aren't back by moon high, someone will come looking for you."

Shadestep had nervously flicked his ears before adding, "Don't take any unnecessary risks. Trust your instincts."

She had nodded eagerly, her tail flicking in anticipation. As she turned to leave the camp later that evening, Sootfur intercepted her, eyes wide with concern. "A night hunt? Alone? Are you sure? I'll come along."

Dapplepaw purred in amusement at her friend's apparent worry and nudged his shoulder with her muzzle reassuringly. "I'll be fine. If I'm not back by moon high, then you can come find me."

Without waiting for his response, she had set off into the night, eager for a successful hunt and prove herself to her clan.

Alone in the forest, she moved like a shadow, her senses

heightened. Every rustle of the undergrowth, every whisper of the breeze filled her with purpose. The thrill of the hunt was invigorating. A plump vole dangled from her jaws, and she had already buried a squirrel to collect later. Her training was paying off, she thought to herself excitedly. She'd be a warrior in no time!

After burying her vole, she made her way toward Silver Falls, she felt a familiar sense of peace settle over her. The roar of the cascading water drowned out the rest of the forest, the mist cooled her face as she padded to the edge of the rocky bank. The stars illuminated on the surface so beautifully she paused, savoring the moment. Suddenly, movement on the other side of the falls caught her attention.

Smokefoot.

The senior warrior was crouched at the water's edge, lapping at the cool surface. Dapplepaw tilted her head. What was he doing out here alone at the hour? She thought about calling out to him, but decided against as he was a senior warrior and probably was out on a late night walk. She was about to back away and continue her hunt when another figure emerged from the shadows.

A PineClan cat.

Dapplepaw's breath hitched as she recognized the sturdy gray tom with dark stripes as Birchshadow, PineClan's deputy. Her paws tingled with unease, Stormwhisper's warning about eavesdropping echoing in her mind. But she couldn't walk away. Not now. What if Smokefoot was attacked? She would need to help.

Carefully, she crept into the undergrowth, flattening herself against the damp earth as she listened.

"If we're going to move forward, I need to know that your clanmates won't interfere and they'll play their part," Birchshadow spoke, his voice smooth and measured.

Smokefoot flicked his tail, gaze unreadable as he sat up. "They'll stay out of your way as long as yours do the same."

Birchshadow chuckled. "Relax, Smokefoot. No one's looking for a fight just yet. But we both know that Thunderstar's grip on StormClan is slipping. He gets weaker each day and he must be running out of lives. It's the perfect time for change."

Dapplepaw's heart pounded. Smokefoot's ears twitched. "We'd have to deal with Shadestep first," he replied as if it were the simplest thing in the entire forest. "What about Maplestar?"

"She'll fall in time," Birchshadow assured him. "But Thunderstar must go first and any other barriers that may stand in the way of your path to power."

"Those barriers include Shadestep?" Smokefoot asked.

"And any other cat that gets in our way." Birchshadow replied.

The air left Dapplepaw's lungs in a rush. Smokefoot and Birchshadow were planning to overthrow StormClan? And possibly PineClan? Confused, she began to creep away slowly, careful to keep her pawsteps light. Her heart pounded so loudly she was sure they'd hear it. Just a few more steps, and...

SNAP.

A twig cracked beneath her paw.

Both warriors' heads whipped toward the sound. Before she could react, Smokefoot lunging into the undergrowth, eyes burning with fury as he pinned her down.

"Dapplepaw," he hissed, fur bristling. "What are you doing here?"

"I was hunting!" she stammered, her mind scrambling for a way out, "I didn't mean to-"

"Didn't mean to what?" Smokefoot interrupted her, leaning down closer to her. "Spy on your own clanmate? Or perhaps *you* were meeting with someone you shouldn't have been?"

Her eyes widened in horror. "What? No!"

"You expect me to believe that?" His voice was low and dangerous. "You're just an apprentice with overactive imagination. No one will believe you over me."

Fear gripped her, but she used all her strength and kicked the tom away so she could stand a bit taller. "Thunderstar will."

Smokefoot winced at the sudden pressure to his stomach and his expression darkened as he hissed, "Careful, Dapplepaw."

Before she could respond, Smokefoot stepped forward, and in one swift motion, he shoved her. The force set her tumbling deeper into the undergrowth, her paws flailing as she struggled to regain her footing. By the time she scrambled to her paws, her fur was covered in dirt and leaves with Smokefoot's dark form vanishing into the trees.

Panic surged through her as she realized what he was doing. He was going to twist the story and make her look like the traitor. Without wasting another moment, she bolted after him, her paws pounding against the forest floor. But Smokefoot had the advantage, and when she finally reached camp, her chest heaving, she saw him walking into Thunderstar's den. She hurried after him.

"I saw her near the PineClan border," Smokefoot was reporting to his leader. His voice calm and laced with urgency. "She was speaking with a PineClan warrior."

Dapplepaw skidded to a halt beside Smokefoot, her eyes wide with disbelief. "That's not true-"

"She's young," Smokefoot raised his voice over hers. "She doesn't know better and we all know how eager she is to prove herself. Even so, meeting with a cat from a different clan is dangerous."

Thunderstar's eyes darkened as he studied the apprentice, "Is this true, Dapplepaw?"

"It's not," Dapplepaw's stomach twisted, and as she went to continue Smokefoot cut her off.

"I saw what I saw, Thunderstar." He spoke, voice once again laced

with mock concern about the situation.

Thunderstar sighed, "You are not to leave camp without supervision until further notice and you'll be confined to camp for the next three sunrises."

"But-" Dapplepaw spoke up but was cut off by her leader.

"That is final, Dapplepaw. I'll have a word with Shadestep this morning to further discuss this matter."

Defeated, she lowered her gaze and left the den.

Smokefoot followed her out of the den with a sly smirk on his face. He padded up beside the apprentice and leaned down to hiss into her ear, "I advise you don't become a problem for me." And with a flick of his tail the tom padded over to the warriors' den.

Dapplepaw watched the warrior leave and felt utterly defeated. She knew Smokefoot had directly threatened her. His advice was to keep her mouth shut or face the consequences. Conflicted and exhausted, Dapplepaw made her way to the apprentices' den. She curled into her nest, heart pounding. She had to find a way to reveal the truth. But how?

Chapter 4

Dapplepaw stirred as pale sunlight filtered through the gaps in the apprentices' den. The warm rays teased her eyelids open, but she resisted at first, trying to cling to the comfort of sleep. Her muscles ached, and her heart sank as the memories of the night before came flooding back. Smokefoot's sharp accusation and the thinly veiled threated echoed in her ears. She flexed her claws against the soft earth beneath her nest, the injustice of it all making her fur prickle with frustration.

Finally, with a sigh, she forced herself up and shook the scraps of moss from her pelt. The camp outside buzzed with morning activity. The brisk air carried the scent of dew clinging to the ferns that draped along the stone walls. Warriors were leaving for patrols in groups, their quiet chatter blending with the faint rustle of leaves. Others were gathered near the fresh-kill pile, sharing prey and conversation.

Dapplepaw paused near the edge of the den, her gaze scanning the camp. Her eyes landed on Shadestep who sat near the warriors' den. He was sharing tongues with his mate, Ravenflight. Dapplepaw had always respected Shadestep for his steady nature and tactical mind, but she sometimes forgot he even had a mate. The two rarely showed affection openly, but now, seeing the gentle way Shadestep ran his tongue over Ravenflight's ear, Daplepaw felt a pang of guilt for having to interrupt their moment.

She hesitated, shifting her paws nervously before taking a deep breath and padding toward them.

"Shadestep," she meowed softly, lowering her voice to avoid drawing attention, "Ravenflight." She dipped her head respectfully toward the black she-cat.

Shadestep looked up, his sharp yellow eyes meeting hers. His expression softened slightly, though his tone remained measured. "Dapplepaw," he greeted. "You've had a rough night, I hear."

Her ears flicked uncomfortably, but she pressed on. "Can you spare me a moment?" she asked, her voice steady despite the anxiety rolling in her chest.

Shadestep glanced at Ravenflight, who gave him a small nod. In return, he gave her a quick lick on the ear before rising to his paw and motioning for Dapplepaw to follow him.

He led her to a more secluded corner of the camp, where the faint hum of conversation from the others faded into the background. Shadestep sat down, curling his tail neatly over his paws. His calm demeanor should have put her at ease, but Dapplepaw's tail flicked anxiously across the ground as she sat down across from him.

"Thunderstar told me what happened last night," Shadestep began, his tone even. "Do you have anything to say?"

Dapplepaw's gaze met his, and she swallowed hard. Shadestep had always been a voice of reason in the clan, someone she trusted implicitly. Part of her wanted to tell him everything—to confess what she'd overheard, the danger she suspected Smokefoot posed. But she hesitated. She had no proof, no plan, and no clear way to explain herself without sounding like a paranoid apprentice. What if he didn't believe her? What if speaking up only made things worse?

"I'm sorry," she said finally, her voice low. She forced herself to look down at her paws.

"Do you admit to meeting with a cat from another clan?" Shadestep asked, his tone cautious but firm.

Dapplepaw's ears flattened against her head. "No," she replied quietly. "I admit I shouldn't have been where I was found. I understand that it looked bad."

Shadestep sighed, his shoulders sagging slightly. "Do you accept the punishment Thunderstar has given you? You know this will limit our training for a while."

Dapplepaw nodded quickly, guilt gnawing at her. "I'll work hard to prove myself to Thunderstar so we can train normally again," she

promised.

Shadestep studied her for a moment before giving a small nod of approval. "Good. Now, take some fresh-kill to Cinderclaw and Shadowkit in the nursery. They'll be hungry."

"Yes, Shadestep," she murmured, rising to her paws.

As she padded toward the fresh-kill pile, Dapplepaw felt the weight of eyes on her. Her pelt burned under the gazes of her clanmates, and her ears twitched as she caught faint murmurs of conversation. She strained to listen and froze when she recognized Smokefoot's deep, mocking growl.

"She's just an apprentice," he sneered. "Always sticking her nose where it doesn't belong. Makes you wonder what she's hiding, doesn't it?"

Dapplepaw's claws dug into the earth as she forced herself to keep walking, her tail lashing behind her. The muted chuckles and whispered replies stung worse than any scratch. Smokefoot's words had been calculated, spreading doubt and suspicion like venom through the camp.

She grabbed two mice from the pile and hurried toward the nursery, her heart pounding.

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The rest of the morning passed in a blur. Dapplepaw threw herself into her duties, cleaning the elders' bedding, replacing moss in the nursery, and repairing a hole in the nursery wall. Her paws worked on autopilot, but her thoughts raced, circling back to the same gnawing worries.

What if everyone believes Smokefoot? What if they think I'm a traitor?

She shook her head fiercely, trying to banish the thoughts, but they clung to her like brambles.

As she carried a bundle of moss back toward the fresh-kill pile, she spotted Sootfur heading her way. His easy smile and relaxed gait

gave her a brief flicker of hope. Maybe he could help. He'd always been someone she could talk to, someone who listened without judgement. But as the tom approached, her heart grew heavy. Could she really tell him? She wanted to trust him, but what if he didn't believe her? Or, worse, what if she put him in danger by involving him?

"You doing all right?" he asked, his yellow-green eyes studying her with concern. "I heard you're stuck in camp for a few sunrises."

"I'm fine," Dapplepaw replied quickly, though her voice wavered.

Sootfur tilted his head, unconvinced. "You don't look or sound fine," he said gently. "Did something happen?"

Dapplepaw hesitated, her heart sinking. She wanted to trust him, but the risks loomed too large in her mind. "I'm fine," she said again, her tone sharper this time.

Sootfur blinked, his ears flicking back in surprise. "If you say so," he murmured. "But if you need to talk, I'm here."

He padded away, leaving her with a heavy weight of guilt and frustration.

As Dapplepaw turned back toward the fresh-kill pile, her focus was elsewhere, she nearly collided head-on with Smokefoot. The dark-furred warrior stepped back just enough to steady himself, his amber eyes narrowing sharply as they fixed on her.

"Watch where you're going," Smokefoot growled, his tone laced with thinly veiled contempt. His gaze bore into her, daring her to challenge him.

Dapplepaw bristled instinctively, the fur along her spine rising. She clenched her jaw before retorting, her voice trembling despite her effort to sound confident. "Maybe you should watch where you're going."

Smokefoot's lips curled into a smirk, his head tilting slightly as he leaned closer. "Still have that sharp tongue, I see," he murmured, his voice low and condescending. His breath was warm against her ear,

but it made her shiver with unease rather than comfort. "Careful with that—it might get you into trouble one day."

He flicked his tail deliberately, gesturing around the camp. Following his gaze, Dapplepaw caught sight of several clanmates stealing glances in her direction. Their expressions were a mix of curiosity and unease, though no one seemed willing to meet her eyes directly. The weight of their silent judgment pressed down on her like a heavy stone.

Her claws unsheathed instinctively, sinking into the soft ground as she fought to control her anger. She wanted to snap back, to tell him off for the unfairness of it all, but she forced herself to stay calm. Smokefoot was baiting her—she could see it in the gleam of his amber eyes and the calculated flick of his ears.

"Good girl," he purred mockingly, his voice dripping with derision. As he brushed past her, his tail deliberately flicked against her flank, as if to emphasize her perceived inferiority.

Dapplepaw stood frozen in place, her breath coming in shallow, shaky gasps. The confrontation left her heart pounding, her mind racing. She wanted to scream, to lash out, but she knew that doing so would only make things worse.

"Dapplepaw?"

The gentle voice startled her, and she spun around to see Dawncloud padding toward her, her hazel eyes filled with quiet concern.

"You look stressed," the medicine cat said softly, her tail flicking toward the medicine den. "Come with me."

Dapplepaw hesitated, her ears flattening slightly as she glanced around the camp. The last thing she wanted was more attention, but something about Dawncloud's calm demeanor soothed her frayed nerves. Reluctantly, she nodded and followed the cream-colored she-cat into the cool, shaded interior of the medicine den.

Inside, the air was earthy and fragrant with the scent of dried herbs.

Dawncloud moved with practiced ease, her paws gliding over the neatly arranged bundles of leaves and stems until she found what she was looking for. She carefully placed a sprig of chamomile at Dapplepaw's paws.

"Here," Dawncloud said, her tone gentle but firm. "Eat this. It'll help calm your mind."

Dapplepaw eyed the herbs warily before leaning down to chew them. The bitter taste made her nose wrinkle, but she swallowed without complaint.

Dawncloud sat beside her, her tail curling neatly over her paws as she watched the young apprentice. "You're stronger than you think," she murmured after a moment. Her voice was soft, but there was a certainty in her words that made Dapplepaw pause. "Whatever is weighing on you, trust that you can handle it. StarClan is always watching, and they see the truth—even when others don't."

Dapplepaw blinked, her green eyes meeting the warm, steady gaze of the medicine cat. It was as though Dawncloud knew something she didn't, as though her words carried a deeper meaning. For a fleeting moment, Dapplepaw felt the heavy knot of anxiety in her chest loosen, just a little.

"Thank you," Dapplepaw said softly, her voice barely above a whisper.

Dawncloud's whiskers twitched in acknowledgment. "Get some rest here," she said, gesturing to a mossy nest tucked away in the corner. "It's quieter in the den. Let your mind settle, even if only for a little while."

Exhaustion finally caught up with Dapplepaw, and she found herself curling into the soft bedding. The shadows of the den felt protective, shielding her from the prying eyes and murmurs of the camp outside. But even as her eyes drifted shut, her mind churned with thoughts of Smokefoot's words and the lingering glances of her clanmates.

Until she figured out a plan—until she could prove her loyalty—

Dapplepaw knew she'd have to endure the whispers, the doubts, and the fear. For now, though, she let the quiet of the medicine den lull her into an uneasy sleep, determined to find a way to rise above it all.

Chapter 5

The next few sunrises crawled by for Dapplepaw, each moment stretching into what felt like an eternity. Confined to camp, she threw herself into mundane tasks: cleaning out the elders' bedding, helping organize the medicine den's herb stores, and repairing weak spots in the warriors' dens. Anything to keep her paws busy and her mind distraction. But no matter how hard she tried, she couldn't ignore the stares. Whispers clung to her like a burr in her pelt.

Every time she walked though camp, the sidelong glances of her clanmates reminded her of what she'd lost: their trust. Even Sootfur had grown distant, his words fewer and his tone more careful when they spoke. She told herself it was for the best—after all, she had deliberately pushed him away during their last conversation, afraid of dragging him into the mess surrounding her. But it didn't make his absence hurt any less. The only cats who hadn't treated her any differently where her mentor, her leader and the medicine cat, Dawncloud.

Finally, Shadestep approached her as she patched up a section of the warriors' den. "Your punishment's over," he said simply, watching her closely.

The words sent a surge of relief through her, and her claws flexed against the dirt in excitement. "Does that mean... we can train again? Properly?"

Shadestep nodded, a small, approving flick of his tail softening his demeanor. "Yes. Tomorrow, we'll start again—proper training."

For the first time in days, Dapplepaw felt a spark of hope. But as the initial thrill faded, reality returned to weigh her down. Training again was one thing, but she knew that stepping outside camp wouldn't magically fix the damage done to her reputation. The scars of Smokefoot's lies ran deep, and no amount of effort would erase the suspicious glares or cautious distance her clanmates kept from her.

That morning, Thunderstar's call rang out, clear and commanding, cutting through the brisk morning air. "Let all cats old enough to catch their own prey gather here, beneath Jagged Peak, for a clan meeting!"

Dapplepaw padded hesitantly into the clearing, joining the rest of her clanmates as they formed a loose circle around Jagged Peak. She tilted her head, puzzled at the sudden meeting, but her confusion faded when her gaze fell on Shadowkit. The black-furred kit was nearly bouncing on his paws, his excitement barely contained as he stood proudly beside his mother, Cinderclaw.

Ah. Dapplepaw's ears perked in realization. She hadn't thought much about Shadowkit recently; her own troubles had consumed her. But now, watching him, she felt a pang of guilt. It had been a moon since she'd gone to visit him in the nursery, and though they'd never been particularly close, she had always found his enthusiasm endearing.

Thunderstar's deep voice cut through her thoughts. "We have a kit here today who is ready to become an apprentice." His tone was warm, a rare purr rumbling in his throat as he continued. "Shadowkit, you have reached the age of six moons, and it is time for you to be apprenticed. From this day on, until you receive your warrior name, you will be known as Shadowpaw. Your mentor will be Mistfeather. I hope she will pass down all they know on to you."

Thunderstar paused briefly before directing his gaze to a silver pelt gleaming in the morning sun, "Mistfeather, you are ready to take on another apprentice. You have trained Thistletail well, and you have shown yourself to be loyal and dependable. You will be the mentor of Shadowpaw, and I expect you to pass on all you know to him."

Mistfeather padded forward with quiet confidence, nodding respectfully at Thunderstar before focusing on her apprentice. Her steady blue eyes met Shadowpaw's as she leaned down to touch noses with him.

"Train hard," Mistfeather said softly, her voice calm but firm.

The clearing erupted in cheers, voices calling Shadowpaw's new name. "Shadowpaw! Shadowpaw!"

Dapplepaw joined in, her voice blending with the others. For the first time in what felt like moons, she felt a flicker of normalcy. As she watched Shadowpaw puff out his chest with pride, she realized she was looking forward to having another apprentice to train with.

But as Shadowpaw bounded over to her, his joy bubbling over, his path was intercepted.

"Don't get too close to Dapplepaw."

The words froze Dapplepaw. Her ears flattened slightly as she turned, catching sight of Cinderclaw standing protectively in front of her son.

"Why?" Shadowpaw asked, his head tilting in confusion.

Cinderclaw glanced around the clearing, lowering her voice but not enough to escape Dapplepaw's sharp hearing. "You've heard what she's been up to, haven't you? Smokefoot told me all about it. You don't want to be caught up in something like that."

Dapplepaw's claws sank into the ground as the words hit her like a blow. She fought to keep her breathing steady, willing herself not to react. Confronting Cinderclaw here would only make things worse, but the urge to defend herself burned in her chest.

"Smokefoot doesn't know anything," Shadowpaw replied, his youthful defiance cutting through the tension. "I don't care what he says."

Before Cinderclaw could respond, Shadowpaw ducked under her and trotted toward Dapplepaw, his tail waving cheerfully.

"I'm finally an apprentice!" he boasted, puffing out his chest.

Dapplepaw forced herself to push the bitterness aside, offering him a small smile. "No more peace and quiet for me, then," she said with mock exasperation, her voice light but strained.

Shadowpaw grinned, clearly not noticing her unease. "Mistfeather says I'm going to be the best warrior in the clan!"

"Well, you'll have to prove that first," Dapplepaw teased, her tail flicking playfully. "Come on, I'll show you the den. Maybe Shadestep and Mistfeather can take us out later, and I can show you the territory."

Shadowpaw's eyes lit up, and he nodded enthusiastically.

As the two apprentices padded away, Dapplepaw couldn't help but glance back at Cinderclaw. The older she-cat was still watching her, her amber eyes sharp and wary.

Let them believe what they want, Dapplepaw thought, her resolve hardening. *I'll protect the clan.*

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The sun was high in the sky when Dapplepaw and Shadowaw padded over to Shadestep and Mistfeather, who were deep in conversation. Shadestep's ears flicked as he noticed them approach, and his amber eyes shifted to meet theirs.

"We were wondering if we could take a tour of the territory before the sun sets," Dapplepaw began, her voice steady despite the nerves buzzing beneath her pelt.

"Yeah! It'd be better for me to get to know the territory sooner rather than later," Shadowpaw added eagerly, his tail swishing with enthusiasm.

Shadestep and Mistfeather exchanged a glance, their silent communication speaking volumes. After a brief pause, Mistfeather nodded, her blue eyes warm. "That's an excellent idea. Let's take Shadowpaw on his first tour of the territory."

Shadestep dipped his head in agreement. "Dapplepaw, I expect you to assist in showing him the borders. This will also give you a chance to refresh your memory."

"Yes, Shadestep," Dapplepaw said, trying to hide her excitement.

She felt as if it was her first time out as an apprentice as well. Perhaps Shadowpaw's enthusiasm was contagious or maybe it just felt good to have something productive to focus on, especially with the whispers about her still swirling in camp.

Shadowpaw, on the other paw, practically bounced in place. "I can't wait! Will we see PineClan and FrostClan's borders?"

"Patience, Shadowpaw," Mistfeather said with a faint smile. "We'll see all the borders. But remember, this isn't just about sightseeing. Pay attention to scents, landmarks, and signs of activity. You'll need to know them as well as your own paws."

Shadowpaw nodded quickly, his enthusiasm undampened. His excitement was infectious, and Dapplepaw couldn't help but feel a little lighter as the patrol set off.

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The forest stretched out around them, the familiar scent of home mingling with the fresh smells of newleaf. Shadestep led the way with long, confident strides, his gaze flicking sharply around as if cataloging every sound and movement. Mistfeather followed close behind, her silver pelt gleaming in the sunlight that filtered through the trees.

Dapplepaw fell in beside Shadowpaw, her tail swishing lightly as she pointed out key landmarks.

"See that tree with the lightning-split trunk?" she said, gesturing toward a massive oak ahead. Its gnarled branches loomed like claws against the sky. "That's Lightning Oak. It's one of our main markers for this side of the territory."

Shadowpaw sniffed the air, his nose twitching. "It smells... different here. Is that PineClan's scent?"

"Good catch," Shadestep said without turning around, his voice carrying over his shoulder. "That's right. We're near PineClan's border. Be respectful, but always stay alert."

As they drew closer, the sharp, piney tang of PineClan's scent grew

stronger. Dapplepaw's fur prickled with unease, and she glanced at Mistfeather, who had slowed her pace.

"Hold up," Mistfeather murmured, her ears swiveling forward. "I hear something."

Dapplepaw strained her ears, and soon enough, the sound of deliberate, heavy pawsteps reached her. The underbrush rustled, and a group of PineClan warriors emerged from the shadows. At their head was Birchshadow, PineClan's deputy, his broad shoulders and piercing amber eyes making him an imposing figure.

Behind him, two other cats flanked him—a wiry orange-brown tom and a sleek gray she-cat. The orange-brown tom's eyes darted around nervously, his fur bristling slightly, as if he was uneasy about being there.

"Well, well," Birchshadow said, his deep voice carrying a note of mockery. "A StormClan patrol so close to the border. How bold of you."

Shadestep stepped forward, his posture calm but unyielding. "This is our territory, Birchshadow. We're well within our rights to be here."

Birchshadow's lips curled in an almost-smile. "Of course. But with tensions running high these days, misunderstandings can happen. I'd hate for your patrol to wander somewhere... unwise."

Dapplepaw felt her claws dig into the earth, but she forced herself to stay still. She didn't like the way Birchshadow's gaze swept over their patrol, lingering a moment too long on her. She could probably guess that Smokefoot had told Birchshadow all about the rumors swirling around her and the way she had listened in on their plans. She was not the PineClan's deputy favorite cat here, and it showed.

"We're not looking for trouble," Mistfeather said evenly, stepping up beside Shadestep. "We're training an apprentice and showing him the borders. That's all."

Birchshadow's eyes flicked to Shadowpaw, and Dapplepaw saw the

young tom stiffen slightly under the intense scrutiny. Shadowpaw's ears flattened briefly, but he kept his head high. "I'll be a great warrior," he said, though his voice wavered slightly.

"I didn't say you wouldn't," Birchshadow replied, his voice dripping with condescension. "StormClan needs strong warriors these days, doesn't it? With all the... rumors flying around."

Dapplepaw's heart clenched, but she kept her expression neutral. She had no doubt the remark was aimed at her, though Birchshadow's gaze remained fixed on Shadowpaw.

"What rumors?" Shadowpaw blurted, his curiosity overriding his caution.

Birchshadow chuckled, his tail flicking lazily. "Oh, just whispers. Nothing worth repeating in polite company."

It was then that Dapplepaw noticed the orange-brown tom behind Birchshadow. His fur bristled more noticeably, and his amber eyes flickered toward Birchshadow with something that looked like... hesitation? Confusion? For a heartbeat, he looked as though he wanted to say something but thought better of it, his tail twitching uneasily.

When Birchshadow turned slightly, the orange-brown tom immediately averted his gaze, but the tension in his posture didn't ease.

The PineClan patrol turned and melted back into the trees, their scent lingering in the air.

"Let's move on," Shadestep said, his voice clipped.

As they resumed their tour, Dapplepaw's mind raced. She couldn't shake the image of the orange-brown tom's reaction. It wasn't just nervousness—it was something more. Did he know something about Birchshadow?

Dapplepaw cast a glance at Shadowpaw, who was bounding ahead, his earlier unease forgotten. She knew one thing for certain: at the next Gathering, she'd keep her ears sharp. If there was something to

uncover, she was determined to find out what it was.

StarClan, give me strength, she thought. *I'll get to the truth, no matter the cost.*

Chapter 6

"I'm telling you, PineClan warriors have been lurking near Silver Falls more than once now," Smokefoot's deep voice carried across the clearing, drawing the attention of the gathered warriors. His dark gray fur bristled slightly as he spoke, his sharp yellow eyes scanning the faces around him. "You all heard about the run-in Shadestep and Mistfeather had with their apprentices at the border a few sunrises ago. That wasn't just an accident. They're testing our defenses, looking for weaknesses. It's only a matter of time before they try to take Silver Falls for themselves."

A murmur rippled through the group. Thistletail's amber eyes darkened with concern as he exchanged a glance with Ravenflight, who sat beside him, her tail flicking in agitation. He hesitated before speaking, his voice slower than usual, as if weighing his words carefully. "If what you're saying is true," he began, his tail twitching uneasily. "then we can't just sit back and wait for them to make the first move."

Ravenflight's tail lashed across the ground. "We need to increase patrols," she said, an edge of tension creeping into her usually steady tone. It was rare to see the black she-cat so unsettled. "If PineCLan thinks they can claim Silver Falls, who's to say they won't push further? If they're bold enough, they could even try to attack our camp directly."

"Exactly," Smokefoot said smoothly, his voice confident and persuasive. "We have to act first. Show them we won't tolerate their little games. If we let them think we're weak, they'll take advantage of it."

A few warriors nodded in agreement, but at the edge of the group, Mistfeather narrowed her blue eyes. "Are you sure about this, Smokefoot?" she asked, her tone measured but skeptical. "Besides that one encounter, I haven't seen anything unusual, and I've been on nearly every dawn and evening patrol since. If PineClan was really up to something, wouldn't we have more signs?"

Smokefoot turned to her sharply, eyes gleaming with an almost predatory intensity. "Are you calling me a liar?"

Mistfeather bristled, taken aback by the sudden hostility. "Of course not," she said, her tail twitching. "I'm just saying.."

"Just saying what?" Smokefoot cut her off with a low growl, his claws flexing against the dirt. "That we should wait? That we should sit around until you or Thunderstar see something 'unusual'? By the time you finally do, PineClan will have the upper paw, and we'll be the fools who let them get away with it."

Ravenflight and Thistletail shifted uneasily, murmuring agreement with one another. The tension in the air thickened like storm clouds rolling in.

A few tail-lengths away, Dapplepaw sat beside Shadowpaw, half-forgotten prey between them. Her claws dug into the ground as she listened, her green eyes darting from warrior to warrior. Smokefoot's words were laced with fear and suspicion, and she could see how they were infecting the others like a creeping sickness. Even those who had seemed uncertain at first were beginning to waver.

This is bad, Dapplepaw thought, her stomach twisting. *It's like he wants a war.*

Before she could dwell on it further on it further, Thunderstar's commanding voice rang out across the camp.

"It's time to leave for the Gathering," he announced, his gaze sweeping over the assembled cats watching as the six selected cats —Dapplepaw, Shadowpaw, Sootfur, Thistletail, Shadestep and Dawncloud—made their way over to him.

As Dapplepaw padded towards Thunderstar she glanced back one last time at Smokefoot and the group of tense warriors around him before focusing back on the leader. A lingering unease settled deep in her chest. Something told her that after tonight, things would never be the same.

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The night air was crisp, carrying the distant hoots of an owl and the soft rustle of leaves as the patrol made their way toward The Great Oak where the Gatherings would be held. The moon shone brightly overhead, its silver light dappling the forest floor as Dapplepaw padded behind Shadowpaw. The dark-furred apprentice moved with quiet confidence, his yellow eyes glinting whenever they caught the moonlight.

Dapplepaw had come to appreciate his company more than she ever expected. Unlike the others, he never treated her differently. He didn't look at her with suspicion, pity, or hesitation. To him, she was simply Dapplepaw—his denmate, his sparring partner, his friend. He was sharp, a quick thinker, and an even better fighter than she had initially realized. Training with him had been a welcome distraction from everything else.

But as the patrol continued forward, her gaze drifted to the back of the group. There, walking alone and slightly apart from the others, was Sootfur. His fur, dusted with moonlight, looked almost silver in places, and his white paws barely made a sound against the earth.

Dapplepaw hesitated. Their friendship had felt different lately—strained in a way that went beyond their argument a moon ago. She knew he cared, but there had been a growing distance between them, one she wasn't sure how to close. Maybe now was her chance.

Slowing her pace, she let Shadowpaw moved ahead and instead fell into step beside Sootfur. "Hi," she greeted him, her voice quiet, uncertain.

Sootfur flicked an ear in acknowledgement but didn't look at her right away. "Hey," he muttered, his tone unreadable. Then, after a heartbeat, he cast her a quick glance, his yellow-green eyes dark with something she couldn't name. "Are you having with your new friend?" He asked, this time his voice carrying a sharper edge, his gaze flicking toward shadowpaw before turning away.

Dapplepaw stiffened. The bitterness in his tone stung, more than she expected.

She had known they weren't as close as they once were, but she hadn't realize he felt this way about her friendship with Shadowpaw. "You're my friend too, Sootfur," she said, trying to reassure him.

But Sootfur let out a scoff, his tail lashing once against the ground. "Oh yeah?" His voice held an unmistakable challenge. "Because ever since the rumors started spreading about you, you've been acting like not of it matters. Like you're fine just letting everyone think whatever they want."

Dapplepaw blinked at him in surprise, her paws faltering for a moment. "Like I'm fine?" she echoed, her voice laced with disbelief. "You think I *want* this? You think I'm *fine* with how the Clan looks at me?" her claws sank into the dirt, her fur bristling. "The only cats who don't treat me like I'm some kind of problem are Shadestep, Thunderstar, Dawncloud.. and Shadowpaw. That's it."

Sootfur stopped walking abruptly, his gaze locking onto her hers. "How would I know?" he shot back. "You didn't tell me what was wrong a moon ago, and you still won't tell me what's going on with you now. It's like you don't even trust me." His voice was quieter this time, but the frustration beneath it was clear.

Dapplepaw opened her mouth to argue, but before she could, Sootfur let out a small sigh, shaking his head. "I'm just worried about you," he admitted, his voice much softer now. "The way Smokefoot talks about you... it's not good, Dapplepaw. I just want to make sure you're safe."

Something in his words made her pause.

For moons, she had been carrying this weight alone, convinced that involving anyone else would only make things worse. But now, seeing the raw concern in Sootfur's eyes, she realized that pushing him away had only hurt him too.

She took a slow breath, then gently brushed her tail against his flank. "I'm sorry," she murmured. "I do trust you. I promise I'll you everything after the Gathering, okay?"

The words left her mouth with reluctance. A part of her still wasn't sure if it was the right choice—if dragging Sootfur into this mess was a risk worth taking. But the flicker of hurt she had seen in his gaze over the past moon, the way he looked at now...

She wanted him to know, even if he couldn't help her.

"Hey Lovebirds," Shadowpaw called teasingly from up ahead, startling the pair. Dapplepaw and Sootfur glanced away from each other abruptly and looked towards the apprentice.

"Hurry up before Shadestep and Thunderstar notice how far behind you are." Shadowpaw warned them before turning and catching up with the patrol on his own.

Dapplepaw and Sootfur glanced at one another before sharing a laugh and hurrying after Shadowpaw.

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The full moon cast an eerie silver glow over the Great Oak clearing, illuminating the gathered cats of all four clans. Tension crackled like lightening in the air, thick enough that even the apprentices could feel it weighing down on their pelts.

On the Great Rock beneath the oak tree the area was named after was Maplestar of PineClan who stood tall beside Thunderstar, his eyes sharp as they swept across the assembled warriors. To his right, Whisperstar of BreezeClan sat with an unreadable expression, her sleek, silver-colored fur barely ruffled by the night breeze. Icestar of FrostClan, the oldest of the four leaders, was a towering presence even in his stillness, his white fur bright in the moonlight.

The Gathering had begun like any others, with reports of prey, new apprentices, and the changing of seasons. But as Thunderstar stepped forward, his gaze landed firmly on Maplestar, and the atmosphere shifted.

"StormClan has noticed increased activity near Silver Falls," Thunderstar announced, his voice steady but carrying a clear warning. "We urge PineClan to respect our borders."

A murmur rippled through the crowd, heads turning between the two leaders. Dapplepaw swallowed hard, stealing a glance at Birchshadow who sat beside the other deputies, his posture was composed and relaxed.

Maplestar's tail flicked, her expression cool and unreadable as she took a step forward. "If you are accusing PineClan of something, Thunderstar, I suggest you bring proof," She began before adding on after a few moments alter. "We have also noticed increased activity from your clan on our borders as well. We will also urge StormClan to respect our borders."

A few angry murmurs were heard from both Thistletail and Sootfur as the accusation made by Maplestar. However, after Shadestep gave them a warning glare they quieted down.

Whisperstar let out a small sigh, her green eyes narrowing as she observed the brewing conflict. "Surely this is a misunderstanding," she interjected, her tone diplomatic.

Icestar, who had been silent until now, finally spoke. His voice carrying the weight of moons of leadership. "A fight over Silver Falls would be reckless. Plenty is running well as the season warmers. Why would PineClan risk open hostility?"

Before Maplestar could answer, Birchshadow stepped forward. "We have seen StormClan warriors lurking at our borders near Silver Falls," he stated, his tone deceptively calm. "I'd like to ask why StormClan is being so openly hostile to us."

Maplestar shot her deputy a stern glare, a silent scolding for such an open accusation, before speaking up, "PineClan patrols its own land, as we always have. If your warriors claim to see us, perhaps they spend less time spying and more time minding their own borders."

A growl rumbled in Thistletail's throat, but Birchshadow spoke before he could. "We have no reason to overstep," the gray-furred deputy said smoothly. "StormClan's paranoia is not our problem."

Thunderstar's tail lashed, his patience noticeably thinning. "StormClan *does not* act out of paranoia, Birchshadow. We protect

what is ours."

Murmurs rose among the gathered cats, the once-civil discussion untaveling into tension-filled whispers. Warriors shifted on their paws, muscles tensing, as if they expected claws to be drawn at any moment.

Whisperstar flicked an ear, watching the situation unfold with wary eyes. "We are bound by the truce tonight," she reminded the cats around her. "This is not a battlefield."

Dapplepaw's heart pounded in her chest. The air was charged, every warrior on edge. If someone made the wrong move, the fragile peace between the Clans could shatter right here under the full moon.

A heavy silence stretched across the clearing, until finally, Maplestar let out a short, humorless chuckle. "Then protect it, Thunderstar," she said with finality. "But do not use PineClan as an excuse for your warriors' unease."

With that, Maplestar flicked her tail and spoke with finality, "This Gathering is over." The brown she-cat jumped down from the Great Rock and gathered her warriors together before leaving. Each clan did the same and as Dapplepaw followed her own patrol back to their territory, she shivered.

This wasn't over. Not by a long shot.

Chapter 7

Dapplepaw sat beside Sootfur in the evening light, the two of them tucked away in a quiet, secluded corner of camp. The low murmur of the Clan drifted around them. But here, away from prying eyes, it felt like they were in their own world.

A partially eat mouse lay between them, though neither of them had taken a bite in some time. Dapplepaw's tail twitched as she gathered her thoughts. She had promised to tell Sootfur everything, and now was her chance. But now that the moment had arrived, her throat felt tight.

Sootfur, noticing her hesitation, nudged her shoulder gently. "Whatever it is, Dapplepaw, you can tell me," he murmured. His eyes held no judgement, only quiet patience. It was uncommon to see the tom so serious, but she guessed that the situation they were in called for it.

She exhaled slowly and met his gaze. "Those rumors that Smokefoot started about me—they're not true."

Sootfur didn't even hesitate. "I didn't believe them to begin with," he stated firmly.

Dapplepaw felt a small wave of relief at his certainty. It was one thing to hope he didn't believe the whispers—it was another to hear it outright.

"Thank you," she said softly, offering a grateful smile.

Sootfur flicked his tail dismissively. "You don't have to thank me for knowing the truth." But his ears twitched with curiosity. "What *is* the truth?"

Dapplepaw took a breath, steeling herself. "It started the night I was given permission to go out and hunt on my own."

She told him everything—how she had overheard Birchshadow and Smokefoot speaking at Silver Fills, how their words had unsettled her, how Smokefoot had caught her listening in and twisted the narrative before she could speak.

Her voice grew quieter as she spoke about the threat, about the way Smokefoot had looked at her, like she was nothing more than a nuisance to be dealt with. The way he had poisoned the minds of their Clanmates against her, turning them cold without even lifting a claw.

Sootfur listened without interrupting, his ears pricked, his jaw tightening with each passing word. When she finished, a heavy silence settled between them.

Finally, he spoke. "What does he get out of all this?" His voice was quiet, but there an intensity beneath it, a sharp edge of anger barely contained.

Dapplepaw met his gaze, her answer simple but undeniable. "Power."

The word was like a stone dropped into still water, sending ripples of unease between them.

Sootfur inhaled sharply. He glanced around camp, as if expecting to see Smokefoot lurking in the shadows, but the older warrior was nowhere in sight. Still, his presence loomed over them, unseen but suffocating.

Sootfur's voice dropped to a whisper. "Do you think he wants to be leader?"

Dapplepaw's claws curled into the dirt. "I don't know if he wants to be *leader*," she admitted. "But I do know he wants to be in control. Maybe that means climbing his way to the top someday. Or maybe it just means making sure StormClan follows *his* vision—no matter what it costs."

Sootfur's tail lashed once before going still. "And if his vision means war?"

Dapplepaw swallowed. "Then he won't hesitate."

Sootfur shuddered, the weight of her words settling over him. He thought back to the Gathering, to the tension between PineClan and StormClan. He had dismissed it at the time, thinking it was clan rivalries at best, the kind that always flared up between StormClan and PineClan over a nice piece of territory. But now, he saw it differently.

"With the tension we saw at the Gathering..." Sootfur murmured, then hesitated before shaking his head. "No. *Even without* the tension, I think he's going to start a fight. And if that happens, a lot of cats are going to get hurt. Maybe worse."

A chill ran through Dapplepaw's fur. StormClan was strong, but it wasn't invincible. A war wouldn't just mean battle—it would mean wounded warriors, empty nests, the scent of blood lingering in the air long after the fighting had ended.

And for what? Smokefoot's pride? His ambition?

The thought made her stomach twist.

She turned back to Sootfur, her green eyes blazing with resolve. "We have to do something."

Sootfur didn't answer right away. He was watching her, taking in the quiet fire in her expression. Then, slowly, he nodded. "We will."

Dapplepaw let out a breath she hadn't realized she was holding. They weren't alone in this.

But as they finished their meal, the weight of their decision settled over them like a storm cloud on the horizon. Because if Smokefoot was truly willing to risk everything, then stopping him wouldn't be easy.

And failure wasn't an option.

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When Dapplepaw returned from the evening patrol, the sky was a

deep shade of navy, speckled with early stars. She padded wearily into the apprentices' den, exhaustion dragging at her limbs. The comforting scent of moss and familiar pelts wrapped around her like a nest of warmth. She curled up, tucking her paws beneath her, the steady rise and fall of Shadowpaw's snoring a rhythmic comfort.

But sleep did not come.

Instead her mind buzzed with everything she had learned — everything she still didn't understand. Confiding in Sootfur had lifted some of the weight from her shoulders, but uncertainty still gnawed at her like a relentless thorn.

Was Smokefoot really the one pulling the strings? Or was Birchshadow the true mastermind?

She needed answers. She needed to understand Birchshadow's role in all of this—what his ambitions were, what he was planning. If Smokefoot was merely a pawn, then who was truly playing the game?

Dapplepaw squeezed her eyes shut, searching for a solution, when suddenly an image flashed in her mind—a wiry orange-and-brown tom, his eyes darting nervously, his posture uneasy. Her eyes snapped open, her breath hitching as recognition dawned.

That cat!

She had seen him before, standing behind Birchshadow when Shadowpaw and her encountered a PineClan patrol along with their mentors. He had barely spoken, shrinking into the background, yet there had been something in his demeanor—hesitation, anxiety, maybe even fear.

Could he know something?

But how could she possibly get in touch with him? Half the Clan already believed the rumors that she had met with a PineClan warrior. If she was caught trying to speak with one now, it would only confirm their suspicions.

Her claws flexed against the moss beneath her.

The Gathering.

If she was lucky, the tom would be there, and she could find a way to speak to him unnoticed. It was a fragile plan, but for now, it was the only one she had.

She exhaled sharply, burying her face in her paws. She needed sleep. But no matter how tightly she shut her eyes, rest remained elusive.

She tossed and turned, shifting so much that she barely registered Shadowpaw stirring beside her until his groggy voice mumbled, "If you're gonna roll around like a fish on land, just take a walk around the clearing or something."

Dapplepaw sighed, feeling a flicker of guilt as she realized she had kicked a clump of moss onto his head. "Sorry," she whispered before slipping out of her nest.

The camp was eerily quiet. A crisp night breeze rustled the ferns, carrying the fresh scent of damp earth and pine needles. The clearing was empty, save for the occasional flicker of movement from the warriors' den.

Dapplepaw inhaled deeply, letting the cool air clear her mind. She padded in slow circles around the clearing, the repetitive movement soothing the restless energy inside her. Finally, she settled just outside the apprentices' den, allowing herself to enjoy the rare serenity of the night.

She closed her eyes.

And when she opened them—

She was at Silver Falls.

Panic shot through her veins. She blinked rapidly, trying to make sense of it. She didn't remember leaving camp. She didn't remember the journey here.

Yet here she stood, the falls roaring beside her, their mist dampening her fur. The night air was thick, suffocating, as if

pressing in on her from all sides.

She tried to move—

She couldn't.

Her heart pounded as her gaze swept the area. Then, she saw it.

A dark trail of red, stark against the silver-lit water. It slithered from the undergrowth at the water's edge, curling and twisting as it bled into the falls, staining them a deep shade of maroon.

Dapplepaw's breath caught in her throat. The coppery scent of blood flooded her nose, thick and suffocating. She tried to step forward, to find the source, but her paws remained rooted in place.

The falls, once glistening under the starlight, now ran dark with crimson.

A wave of dread crashed over her.

Whose blood is this?

A shadow moved at the edge of her vision. She strained to see—but just as suddenly as the dream had started—

It ended.

Dapplepaw jolted awake, her breath coming in ragged gasps. Her sides heaved as she sat up, heart hammering against her ribs.

Morning sunlight filtered through the entrance of the apprentices' den, casting golden rays onto the mossy ground. Her fur was bristling, every nerve in her body still on edge.

Outside, she caught sight of Thistletail emerging from the warriors' den, followed by Ravenflight and Cinderclaw. The dawn patrol.

Flattening her ears, she ducked her head, not wanting to be seen. With stiff limbs, she forced herself back into the apprentices' den, curling into her nest once more.

Her mind reeled.

That dream—*if it was a dream*—wasn't just some random nightmare.

It was a warning.

And deep down, she knew exactly who it was about.

Birchshadow.

Smokefoot.

Something terrible was coming.

Chapter 8

Dapplepaw kept her dream to herself. She wasn't sure why. Maybe it was because the memory of it still felt too fragile, too uncertain. Like a thin layer of ice over a deep, dark lake, and speaking of it might shatter it entirely. Or maybe because it lingered in her mind like the final whispers of a fading storm, haunting and unresolved.

The vision had been vivid, more real than any dream she had ever had before. The swirling in the pool at Silver Falls still clung to her senses, its rich, metallic scent lingering in her nose as if she had truly been there. The water, once clear and rushing, had been thick with crimson, staining the rocks as it churned. And the sound of the undergrowth shifting echoed in her ears even now. She didn't fully understand it, not yet. But one thing was for certain: it was important she figure it out as soon as possible.

Her paws carried her toward Sootfur before she had even decided to speak with him. She was drawn to him instinctively, seeking his presence like a ship searching for the shore. He was stretched out near the warrior's den, sprawled on his side in a pool of golden sunlight. His dark grayish-black fur almost shimmered in the warmth, and his white paws twitched as if he were debating getting up but ultimately couldn't be bothered. He swiped a lazy paw over his ear, his yellow-green eyes flickering open just as she neared. A knowing gleam settled in them.

"You've got that look," he murmured, his voice edged with amusement. "The one that means trouble."

Dapplepaw rolled her eyes but sat beside him, wrapping her tail neatly over her paws. "I do not."

"You do," he countered easily, not moving from his relaxed sprawl. "Like you're about to say something ridiculous and expect me to go along with it."

Dapplepaw hesistated, flicking her ears as she debated how to word

this. Then, exhaling slowly, she said. "I think I know someone who help us. But.. it's risky." She didn't actually *know* the cat from PineClan who she was picturing. But she *knew* what he looked like and that was a start.

Nonetheless, the statement got Sootfur's attention. He stretched his front paws out in front of him, flexing his claws before rolling onto his side to face her properly. The amusement in his gaze dimmed, replaced with quiet curiosity. "Risky how?"

She hesitated again. Her gaze flicked around camp, scanning for eavesdroppers. The clearing bustled with the usual afternoon activity. No one was paying them any mind. Still, she lowered her voice.

"They're from... PineClan."

Sootfur stilled, his easy demeanor vanishing in an instant. His tail flicked once, sharply, and his eyes darkened with guarded disbelief. "You can't be serious."

"I am," she said firmly, bracing herself for the pushback. "I don't know if we can trust them, but they might be willing to listen. And we don't have many options. If there's even a chance they can help us figure out what's coming, isn't it worth trying?"

Sootfur sat up properly now, her ears pinned back. His expression was unreadable, his muscles tense beneath his pelt. "Dapplepaw, do you even hear yourself? PineClan is the last place we should be looking for help. Especially now, with Smokefoot stirring things up. If anyone finds out..."

"I know," she interrupted, her voice steady despite the nerves twisting in her stomach. "But what choice do I have?"

The question hung between them, heavier than she had intended.

Sootfur's claws flexed against the dirt, his tail twitching restlessly. His gaze flicked toward the sky, as if searching for some unseen guidance, but no answers came from the blue stretching above them. The silence stretched between them, thick with unspoken

fears.

Finally, he exhaled. His ears twitched, and for a moment, Dapplepaw thought he might refuse to help entirely. But then, he muttered, "I can't believe I'm saying this, but... alright. If you really think this is the best shot we've got, then I'll back you up. But we have to be smart about it."

Dapplepaw felt a strange mix of relief and anxiety in her chest. The weight of what they were about to do pressed heavily on her shoulders, but at least she wouldn't have to carry it alone.

She nodded, "We will be."

Sootfur narrowed his eyes. "Famous last words."

She huffed a small laugh despite herself. "Then let's make sure they aren't."

Their plan wasn't perfect. It wasn't safe. But it was the only path that made sense.

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Later that day, the camp buzzed with quiet activity as the sun dipped lower in the sky, painting the mountain in hues of gold and amber. Warriors shared tongues and a hunting patrol disappeared through the camp entrance.

In the midst of it all, Dapplepaw found herself beside Sootufr, settling into the rhythm of their rekindled friendship. The day's earlier tension hadn't disappeared completely, but for now, it was buried beneath the comfort of familiarity.

They shared a plump thrush, plucking at the feathers and flicking them away with quiet amusement.

"You're hogging all the best bites," Sootfur accused, nudging her shoulder with his own.

Dapplepaw snorted, swallowing her mouthful. "I think you're just slow."

He narrowed his yellow-green eyes in mock offense. "Oh, is that so?"

"Mmhm," she hummed, swiping the last morsel of meat before he could get to it.

Sootfur let out a dramatic sigh, shaking his head. "Unbelievable. I think I liked it better when you were avoiding me."

She laughed, a genuine, unguarded sound that felt foreign after everything that had happened. It had been too long since she'd felt like just an apprentice again—since she hadn't been drowning in uncertainty and secrets.

For a little while, she let herself forget.

But peace never lasted.

Across the clearing, Shadestep caught her eye and flicked her tail in a silent summons. Dapplepaw sighed, swallowing the last remnants of warmth before pushing to her paws.

"Looks like you're being summoned," Sootfur observed. "Good luck."

She rolled her eyes, flicking his ear with her tail as she passed. "Try not to miss me too much."

He scoffed. "I'll try to manage."

Dapplepaw padded over to where Shadestep stood beside Mistfeather and Shadowpaw. "I want you to get some extra battle training in today. Shadowpaw could use a sparring partner, and I think it'll be good for you, too," Shadestep said, gesturing to the black-and-white tom.

Dapplepaw nodded, "Okay."

Mistfeather responded, "Excellent! Thunder Hollow should be empty. We'll check in on your progress in a bit."

With that, Dapplepaw and Shadowpaw sent out towards the camp entrance. "Guess that means we're stuck with each other,"

Shadowpaw drawled.

Dapplepaw smirked. "Try to keep up."

They made their way to Thunder Hollow, where the ground was worn smooth from moons of practice battles. The air smelled of churned earth and crushed grass, and the trees around them cast dappled shadows in the fading afternoon light.

Dapplepaw had barely set paw in the clearing before Shadowpaw lunged at her from the side, his dark fur a blur.

She twisted sharply, instincts kicking in just in time to avoid his outstretched paws. He landed with a heavy thud where she had just been, his claws sinking into the dirt.

"You're getting slower," he teased, shaking dust from his fur as he turned to face her.

Dapplepaw flicked her tail, unimpressed. "And you're getting sloppier."

Shadowpaw grinned, his eyes glinting with mischief. He started to circle her, his movements smooth and calculated. "So," he mused, drawing out the word, "how was your date with Sootfur?"

Dapplepaw nearly tripped over her own paws. Heat surged to her ears as she shot him an incredulous glare. "It wasn't a date!"

Shadowpaw tsked, clearly enjoying her flustered reaction. "That's not what it looked like from where I was sitting." He continued circling her, tail swishing like a predator toying with its prey. "You two were sitting awfully close."

She groaned. "You sound like an elder gossiping over fresh-kill."

He gasped in mock offense. "I do not."

Dapplepaw had had enough. Without warning, she lunged at him, claws sheathed but swift. Shadowpaw ducked, already anticipating her attack—but she had anticipated that, too. Twisting mid-air, she hooked her paw around his hind leg and yanked.

Shadowpaw let out a surprised oof as he hit the ground with a thud. He blinked up at her, momentarily stunned.

Dapplepaw smirked, standing over him. "Still think I'm slow?"

Shadowpaw let out a breathless laugh, shaking his head. "Alright, alright. I surrender."

Satisfied, she stepped back, letting him roll to his paws.

They spent the next while sparring, slipping into a natural rhythm of dodging, countering, and striking. Shadowpaw was fast, but Dapplepaw had learned to read him over time, predicting his moves before he made them. It felt good—normal. They had continued to spar until their mentors came to observe and praise the pair for a job well done.

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As the sun dipped lower, stretching golden light across the camp, Dapplepaw, Sootfur, and Shadowpaw found themselves lounging near the fresh-kill pile, their conversation drifting from one meaningless topic to the next.

"You ever notice how Thistletail walks like he's carrying the weight of the whole forest on his back?" Shadowpaw mused, stretching his paws out in front of him.

Sootfur snorted. "That's because he thinks he is."

Dapplepaw flicked her tail in amusement. "I think he just takes his job seriously. Not all of us can be lazy like you, Shadowpaw."

"Lazy?" Shadowpaw scoffed, pressing a paw to his chest as if she had personally wounded him. "I'll have you know, I'm a dedicated apprentice."

Sootfur raised a brow. "Dedicated to avoiding work?"

Dapplepaw laughed as Shadowpaw huffed, but before he could protest, a familiar voice carried across the clearing.

"I'll be moving to the nursery soon."

The apprentices immediately fell silent. Ravenflight's smooth, confident tone had come from the other side of the camp, where she stood speaking with Mistfeather. The older warrior nodded in approval, murmuring something in response.

Dapplepaw's ears perked up, and she barely had time to process the words before Shadowpaw twisted toward them, his eyes wide.

"No way," he whispered.

Sootfur's tail twitched. "Ravenflight's expecting kits?"

Dapplepaw's heart skipped with excitement. "Shadestep's going to be a father?"

Shadowpaw leaned in conspiratorially. "Forget that—imagine how tough her kits are going to be. They'll be little battle machines."

Sootfur smirked. "Great. More cats to show us up in training."

They exchanged grins, their earlier worries momentarily forgotten as they absorbed the unexpected news. The weight of recent events still loomed over them, but for now, just for a little while, the troubles of StormClan could wait.

Chapter 9

Dapplepaw's paws pounded against the jagged stone as she sprinted through the towering peaks, the wind whipping through her fur. Every breath came sharp and fast, burning her lungs, but she pushed herself harder, leaping from one precarious ledge to the next. The mountain air was thin, crisp, and unforgiving, but her focus remained unshaken. Below her, the sprawling valley stretched endlessly, a breathtaking sight she barely registered. There was no room for hesitation. One wrong step, and she'd fall. Likely to her death.

Her muscles burned as she scrambled up the final incline, her claws scraping against the unforgiving rock. At last, she lunged onto a narrow ledge, chest heaving as she steadied herself. The adrenaline still thrummed though her veins when she locked eyes with her mentor, Shadestep, who stood waiting with an unreadable expression. His amber gaze flicked with something akin to approval as he dipped his head.

"You've passed," he said simply.

Relief flooded Dapplepaw, momentarily pushing aside her exhaustion. She had done it! She had conquered the Mountain's Trial. Carefully, she maneuvered her way down to meet Shadestep, still catching her breath.

"Well done," he continued, his voice measured but firm. "Your insticts were sharp, and you read the terrain well. You committed to your jump, and you adapted when necessary." His expression darkened slightly. "However, you nearly slipped on that last stretch. Loose stones are as dangerous as any enemy. In battle, hesitation or misjudgment can mean the difference between survival and a broken limb."

Dapplepaw dipped her head, processing his words. She knew her mentor was just encouraging her to refine her skills and maybe a bit worried. After all, every now and then an apprentice was lost while

attempting the Mountain Trials. It wasn't frequent but it was often enough where the training to be able to attempt the test was extensive and intensive.

"I'll continue to improve," she assured her mentor who responded with a curt nod. However, before he could say more a voice rang out from below them.

"Shadestep! You need to get back to camp." Thistletail's urgent tone sent a prickle of unease down Dapplepaw's spine. The golden-brown tom had climbed partway up the incline, his amber eyes sharp with concern.

Shadestep tensed at the urgency before relaxing, "What happened?"

"The border patrol returned injured. There was a fight with PineClan."

Dapplepaw's stomached lurched. Without hesitation, she and her mentor followed Thistletail down the mountainside, paws skidding against the loose earth at they raced back to camp.

The moment they entered camp, they were met with chaos.

A crowd had gathered near the center of the clearing, voices rising in anger. The arid scent of blood and torn fur hung in the air. Dapplepaw's heart clenched as she spotted the injured patrol. Gashes in their pelts and bramble scratches crisscrossed their flanks. Luckily, it seemed as though there weren't any serious injuries.

Her gaze shifted to Shadowpaw. The apprentice was hunched over, his pelt ruffled as his mother, Cinderclaw, fussed over him, her sharp eyes blazing with fury. Nearby, Sootfur sat licking a wound on his shoulder, his expression unreadable.

"This is your fault," Smokefoot growled, his voice thick with rage. "Your weakness has put us all at risk. PineClan had continued to push our boundaries, and you continued to do nothing."

Thunderstar remained still, his eyes calm yet unreadable. "Smokefoot, we don't have that PineClan instigated this—"

Cinderclaw whipped around, her fur bristling. "Proof?" She spat. "Our warriors were attacked! Shadowpaw was attacked!" Her voice cracked as she stepped toward Thunderstar, her claws flexing into the dirt. "And you want to wait? To *talk*?"

A ripple of unease spread through the gathered clan. Even those tending to the wounded paused, eyes darting between their leader and his challengers.

Shadestep stepped forward then, his presence commanding as he moved to stand beside Thunderstar. "Enough." His voice was sharp, slicing through the growing uproar like a claw through the bark. "This isn't the time to be fighting with one another," he hissed. "We need to focus on our wounded first."

Smokefoot's eyes narrowed. "And sit around and wait for PineClan to strike again?"

Shadestep's tail flicked once, his eyes steady as they met Smokefoot's. But before Shadestep could reply, Thunderstar spoke up. "At the next gathering, we will talk with Maplestar. Calmly. Rushing into battle now, without knowing the full truth, will only weaken us." His gaze swept over the gathered warriors. "Fighting amongst ourselves only benefits PineClan."

A heavy silence followed his words.

"Thunderstar is right," the raspy voice of Stormwhisper came from among the gathered cats. "Even if PineClan attacked us first, if we retaliate we would start a war." She paused, taking a deep breath as if speaking took all of her energy. "And you young cats know nothing of war. All you want to do is fight."

Smokefoot's lips curled, as he turned to face the elder but before he could say or do anything, Shadestep spoke up, "This conversation is over."

Smokefoot didn't argue further. He growled audibly and with a sharp flick of his tail, he turned away. Cinderclaw hesitated before stalking after him, her tail lashing in frustration.

As the gathered cats began to disperse and the tension began to settle, Dapplepaw bounded over to Sootufr, who was still licking his wounds. "Are you okay?"

"I've had worse," he assured her, before his voice dropped lower. "Something's not right, Dapplepaw."

She frowned. "What do you mean?"

Sootfur cast a wary glance towards Smokefoot before leaning in. "I swear Smokefoot lunged first—before they were even on our side of the border."

Dapplepaw's fur bristled. "You think he started the fight?"

Before Sootfur could respond, Shadowpaw limped toward them, his eyes darting between them. He lowered his voice. "He's right. I saw it too." His tail twitched anxiously as he glanced over his shoulder, where Smokefoot was now speaking in hushed tones to Cinderclaw and Ravenflight. "And Smokefoot's furious with Thunderstar." Shadowpaw added.

Dapplepaw's stomach churned. The unease that had been lurking in her chest now spread like wildfire. Their wasn't just dealing with threat from PineClan anymore.

"You two should see Dawncloud," Dapplepaw responded instead. "If anything is going to happen we all need to be in the best condition we can be."

Shadowpaw opened his mouth to protest but Sootfur gave him a nudge in the direction of the medicine den. "Dapplepaw's right. We don't know what's going to happen and you're limping. We don't want you to miss out on any important training."

Shadowpaw grumbled but nodded his head and the two toms made their way to the medicine den leaving Dapplepaw by herself in the clearing.

he gazed around, watching as Shadestep and Thunderstar disappeared into his den, most likely to speak about the situation. Smokefoot and his allies continued to speak in hushed whispers,

their eyes dark with resentment.

A chill ran through her fur as she made her way towards the apprentice's den to get some rest. The battle lines were being drawn and she feared the real war might not be against PineClan anymore.

Chapter 10

The dawn light filtered through the jagged peaks of the mountains, casting long golden streaks across StormClan's camp. A crisp morning breeze rustled through the trees, but it did little to ease the exhaustion weighing down the cats within the hollow. Dapplepaw stretched outside the apprentice's den, wincing as a sharp ache ran through her legs. Every muscle in her body protested after the relentless training sessions Shadestep had been putting her through on top of the seemingly endless hunting *and* border patrols. She had always prided herself on her agility and endurance, but even she was reaching her limits.

And she wasn't the only one.

Ever since the border skirmish with PineClan, StormClan had nearly tripled its patrol. Warriors barely had time to rest before they were sent out again, reinforcing scent markers, covering every inch of the broders, and keeping a wary eye out for any sign of enemy movement. The strain of it all was suffocating. Conversations were clipped, tempers flared, and even Stormwhisper—normally a source of calm wisdom—had grown restless with the ever-present tension in the air.

What made it worse was that they couldn't even afford to leave a proper night watch in camp. Every warrior was needed on patrol, and there simply weren't enough paws to spare. If PineClan decided to attack in the dead of night, StormClan would be caught vulnerable, a risk no one dared speak of aloud.

Yet, Smokefoot made his feelings known, and more often than not, he made them known loudly.

"This is what happens when we sit back and let another Clan push us around," he sneered, his voice sharp with disdain as a group of warriors staggered into camp, their pelts dusted with dried leaves and their tails dragging with exhaustion. Their eyes were dull, shoulders sagging from their third patrol of the day, yet Smokefoot

didn't seem to care. If anything, their weariness only fueled his anger. "We're wasting energy chasing our own tails when we should be taking action!"

Thistletail, standing nearby, flicked his ears irritably. "You think we should just march into PineClan's territory and drive them out?" he asked, his tone heavy with sarcasm. "We don't even know what they're planning."

Smokefoot turned on him, eyes burning with barely contained fury. "That's exactly the problem, Thistletail. We're letting them decide the terms of this conflict. If we don't act first, they will—and when they do, we'll be too tired and too weak to stop them."

Shadestep had been listening from a few tail-lengths away, and at that moment, he stepped forward, his imposing presence demanding attention. "We will act if necessary," he said, voice even but carrying the weight of authority. "But the decision lies with Thunderstar. We don't move without his command."

Smokefoot's tail lashed violently behind him, his frustration evident in every bristling hair along his spine. "And how long do we wait? Until one of our patrols doesn't come back?" His claws kneaded the ground, as if he were imagining tearing into an unseen enemy.

Shadestep met his glare, unflinching. "The Gathering is tonight."

A heavy silence followed. Every cat knew what that meant. Thunderstar was hoping to find answers tonight—answers that could lead to peace or war. No one said it, but they all felt it: tonight would change everything.

Shadestep finally broke the silence, his sharp gaze flicking toward Dapplepaw. "You're coming to the Gathering."

Dapplepaw blinked in surprise, her ears perking up. "Me?"

Shadestep gave a short nod. "Yes. You, Smokefoot, Thistletail, and Cinderclaw. Find Cinderclaw and let her know."

Dapplepaw swallowed. It was supposed to be a night of peace, where the Clans came together beneath Silverpelt to share news and

uphold the ancient traditions. But this time... she wasn't so sure peace was in the stars.

As she padded toward the warriors' den to relay Shadestep's orders, her mind wandered to something—or rather, someone—else.

The brown-and-orange tom from PineClan.

She had seen him at the border before, had caught a glimpse of something in his eyes that didn't match the blatant hostility surrounding their Clans. Was there something more to him that could help their clans? She wasn't sure but tonight, she would find out.

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By the time the StormClan patrol padded into the clearing beneath the towering Great Oak, the other three clans had already gathered. The air was thick with the mingling scents of rival warriors, their gazes flicking toward the newcomers with varying degrees of curiosity and suspicion. Atop the Great Rock, the leaders sat like unmoving sentinels, their eyes scanning the crowd, their pelts rippling with unreadable emotions.

Dapplepaw felt the weight of the moment press down on her shoulders. Conversations around the clearing were hushed, every cat aware of the rising tensions between StormClan and PineClan. The usual air of camaraderie that defined the Gatherings was absent, replaced by an undercurrent of unease—like the air before a thunderstorm.

As Thunderstar leaped onto the Great Rock, his dark amber eyes met Maplestar's sharp green ones—two storm clouds colliding in a silent clash. A pause stretched between them, thick with unspoken challenge, before Thunderstar dipped his head in a gesture of formal politeness.

"Apologies for keeping you waiting," he said evenly.

Maplestar's tail flicked once, a controlled movement that betrayed her simmering irritation. She stepped forward, her gaze sweeping

over the assembled cats before settling back on Thunderstar.

"I believe we should begin by addressing the growing hostility between our clans," she announced, her voice smooth but edged with the unmistakable bite of steel. "A few sunrises ago, one of our patrols was forced to defend themselves when your warriors launched an unprovoked attack on our land."

A murmur rippled through the gathering like wind through dry grass. StormClan cats bristled, exchanging sharp glances. A few PineClan warriors murmured in agreement, their tails lashing.

Thunderstar's expression darkened, but his voice remained steady. "That is a bold accusation, Maplestar," he said. "Especially when it was your warriors who crossed into our territory first. We have every right to defend our borders."

Maplestar let out a short, humorless laugh. "Defend? Is that what you call it?" Her green eyes glinted with contempt. "We have done nothing to provoke StormClan. Yet your warriors lurk near our borders like foxes waiting for a weakness, circling like vultures. We cannot ignore such aggression."

Smokefoot, standing near the front of the StormClan crowd, muttered something under his breath, his claws digging into the earth. Nearby, Cinderclaw's ears flattened, and even Thistletail's normally calm demeanor hardened with irritation.

Thunderstar lifted his chin. "If our warriors are on high alert, it is because PineClan's recent actions have given us cause. You claim innocence, but our patrols have caught your scent well beyond your borders more than once."

A few gasps sounded from the gathered warriors. PineClan's deputy, Birchshadow, stepped forward, his gray pelt bristling in agitation. "And you expect us to believe you haven't been sending your own spies?" he shot back, his yellow eyes narrowing.

Thunderstar's tail lashed once, his voice cold. "We don't send spies, Birchshadow. Unlike some clans, we don't need to skulk in the shadows."

At that, several PineClan warriors hissed in outrage. A gray-furred tom near the edge of the crowd bared his teeth, his fur bristling as if daring a StormClan warrior to challenge him. Across the clearing, warriors from other clans shifted uncomfortably, their ears twitching as they glanced between the leaders. Even those with no stake in the conflict could sense the fragile balance tipping toward something dangerous.

Dapplepaw swallowed hard. This wasn't just tension—it was hostility on the verge of spilling into something worse.

Maplestar's gaze burned with fury, but her voice remained controlled. "Enough of this back and forth," she said, though the fire in her tone was unmistakable. "StormClan's continued aggression will not go unanswered. If your patrols cross into our land again, there will be consequences."

Thunderstar's eyes narrowed, his broad shoulders tensing. "And if PineClan continues to provoke us," he countered, "you'll find we are more than prepared to defend our clan."

A heavy silence fell over the clearing, so thick that even the wind seemed to still. Warriors from both clans stared at one another, muscles taut, claws digging into the earth as if waiting for the first move to be made.

Finally, after what felt like an eternity, Maplestar flicked her tail sharply. "Then I suppose we are at an impasse," she said icily.

Dapplepaw's ears buzzed with the tension crackling in the air. The words being exchanged between Thunderstar and Maplestar still lingered, but her thoughts were elsewhere.

Her heart gave a sudden jolt as she spotted him—the brown-and-orange tom from before, standing near the edge of the gathering. Unlike the others, he wasn't drawn into the murmurs of his clanmates or the growing unease rippling through the crowd. Instead, he stood stiffly, his tail still, ears slightly flattened as his gaze flicked between the leaders with an expression that looked less like anger and more like frustration.

Dapplepaw hesitated for only a moment before taking a deep breath and padding toward him. She kept her steps light, trying not to appear confrontational. The tom, however, noticed her instantly. His shoulders tensed, and his yellow eyes flicked to hers, narrowing slightly.

"What do you want?" he asked, his tone neither hostile nor welcoming—just wary.

Dapplepaw slowed her steps but didn't stop. "I saw you before," she said, choosing her words carefully. "Near the border."

His ear twitched, but he didn't deny it.

Dapplepaw took that as a sign to continue. "I never got the chance to introduce myself. I'm Dapplepaw." She kept her tone light, open, as if she were simply making casual conversation.

For a moment, the tom said nothing. His eyes searched hers, measuring, weighing. Then, after a pause, he sighed. "Oakpaw."

Dapplepaw tipped her head slightly. "Oakpaw?" she echoed. Somehow, the name suited him.

Oakpaw gave a slow blink, his tail flicking once before settling again. "So what do you want, Dapplepaw?" His voice wasn't sharp, but it carried an edge, like he was already preparing to brush her off.

She hesitated. She knew she had to tread carefully. "I just wanted to ask..." She glanced at the leaders atop the Great Rock before lowering her voice. "What your opinion on Birchshadow was and..." Dapplepaw trailed off as she flicked her tail towards the PineClan deputy who was now speaking to Smokefoot.

Oakpaw's fur bristled instantly, though he didn't step back. Instead, he took a slow step closer, his voice dropping to a quiet but firm whisper. "You don't know what you're asking."

Dapplepaw's heart beat faster. "Then help me understand."

Oakpaw's gaze darkened, unreadable. "And why would I do that?"

She frowned, unsure how to answer. "Because—because if there's something happening, if something's wrong, we should know before things get worse."

Oakpaw exhaled sharply, his ears twitching in frustration. "Look," he muttered. "You seem... fine. But this isn't something you can fix. And if you're smart, you'll stop asking questions."

Dapplepaw's tail flicked anxiously. "But—"

"I mean it." His voice was quiet, but there was an urgency in it, a warning she couldn't ignore. "Mind your own business."

His yellow eyes held hers for a heartbeat longer before a sharp call rang out through the clearing.

"Enough of this!"

Dapplepaw turned just in time to see Maplestar glaring at Thunderstar, her tail lashing behind her. "We will not stand by and let StormClan threaten us. Again, I will remind you that if your patrols cross into our land again, there will be consequences."

A long silence followed, stretching like a taut string ready to snap.

Finally, Maplestar let out a slow, controlled breath before flicking her tail and leaped down from the Great Rock, her warriors moving swiftly at her signal. PineClan's departure was silent, deliberate. No parting glances. No lingering looks.

Dapplepaw turned back toward Oakpaw, but his posture had shifted. He stood rigid, his expression unreadable once more. Without a word, he turned and padded away, vanishing into the mass of PineClan warriors.

She watched him go, her mind spinning with unanswered questions.

As Thunderstar called for StormClan to leave, Dapplepaw followed her clanmates, but her paws felt heavier than before. This wasn't over.

Oakpaw knew something. And whether he wanted to or not,

Dapplepaw was going to find out the truth.

Chapter 11

Dawncloud's den was bitterly cold, the stone walls seeming to trap the chill rather than shield against it. Frost clung to the cracks, glinting faintly in the dim light that filtered through the narrow entrance. The sharp scent of herbs, dry and brittle, did little to soften the bite of the winter air curling through the den. Each step Dawncloud took stirred faint rustling whispers — dried leaves shifting underpaw, brittle stalks brushing against the stone.

Outside, the muted hum of camp life was frayed and uneven, as though each conversation carried a hidden edge, every shared glance weighted with unspoken fears. Since the Gathering, the clan had moved like cats walking on thin ice — tense, cautious, brittle.

Two sunrises had passed since then, but for Dawncloud, time felt slower, each heartbeat stretched taut beneath the weight of the prophecy. It had pressed at her chest for moons now, gnawing at her sleep and her certainty. She'd kept it secret for too long — afraid, not just of what it might mean, but of what Thunderstar might see in it.

But fear had no place now. With the borders strained, tensions with PineClan rising, and her clanmates watching each other with thinly-veiled suspicion, there was no more time for silence.

Dawncloud emerged from the den into the frigid air, her breath curling in pale clouds as she crossed the clearing. Thunderstar sat near the edge of camp, his fur brushing against Mistfeather's, their soft grooming ritual a rare moment of peace. His ears twitched as she approached, as though even at rest, his mind never truly was.

"Thunderstar. Mistfeather," Dawncloud greeted, dipping her head politely. Her voice was quiet, but edged with urgency as she directed her next statement at Thunderstar. "I need to speak with you. Privately." Her green eyes flicked between them. "Bring Shadestep too. It's important."

Thunderstar studied her for a long moment, his sharp amber gaze searching her face before he finally stood, his size blocking the weak winter light. "I'll find him."

Dawncloud retreated before her nerves could betray her, leaving the leader and his mate behind. Her paws felt heavier with each step back toward the den.

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When Thunderstar pushed into the den a short while later, the narrow entrance seemed to shrink around his broad frame, his scarred pelt brushing the stone. His amber eyes were alert, but up close, Dawncloud could see the exhaustion clinging to him — a weight he carried in the set of his shoulders, in the way his tail dragged behind him instead of curling with authority.

Shadestep followed silently, his sleek black form gliding in like a shadow given shape. His fur seemed to absorb the dim light, leaving only his green eyes visible — gleaming like twin emeralds. He stood near the wall, perfectly still, a cat accustomed to observing rather than speaking. Shadestep's silence was never empty — it was full of thought, of weight — a silence that could judge, or protect, depending on the moment.

Dawncloud sat up straighter, wrapping her tail neatly over her paws, though her heart pounded beneath her ribs. "I've... kept something to myself for the past few moons," she began, her voice softer than she intended.

Thunderstar gave a curt nod, lowering himself onto his haunches. Shadestep didn't sit, only inclined his head slightly — a silent invitation to continue.

Dawncloud drew in a breath, the cold air biting at her throat. "I had a vision. It was different from the others — colder, heavier. It's stayed with me."

She hesitated, then forced herself to go on. "It started with ice. Endless ice, stretching in every direction. The world was so quiet — unnaturally so — and when I walked across it, I could hear it

groaning beneath my paws, like something old and fragile, ready to break."

Thunderstar's tail-tip twitched, but he said nothing. Shadestep remained as still as stone, his expression unreadable — but his eyes never left her.

"And then," Dawncloud's voice faltered slightly, "the whispers began. They came from everywhere and nowhere. Cold, breathless voices carried on the wind, speaking together but never quite in unison. They said: *'The storm's light will reveal the truth, but beware the danger that walks, hidden in plain sight.'*"

Her own words sent a shiver through her pelt, her breath curling in the chill. "Then I saw her — Dapplepaw."

Shadestep's head lifted slightly, the only sign of his reaction. Thunderstar's jaw tightened, his claws flexing briefly into the stone.

"She stood on the ice, surrounded by shadows — dark shapes with no features, circling her like wolves. And the ice beneath her cracked. I could see it spreading out from under her paws, thin veins splintering across the frozen ground."

The silence that followed was thick, pressing against the walls of the den.

Shadestep's voice was the first to break it — low and measured, but there was a thread of unease woven into his usual calm. "You're certain it was Dapplepaw?"

"There was no mistaking her," Dawncloud said firmly. "The light caught her fur, her eyes — it was her."

Thunderstar's brow furrowed, his tail flicking restlessly. "Ice cracking," he muttered. "The clan — falling apart."

"No," Dawncloud said sharply, heart lurching at the assumption. "That's not what it meant. The ice was warning us — warning me. Something dangerous is already here, lurking close to Dapplepaw. The vision wasn't blaming her — it was showing us that something's coming for her."

Shadestep's tail curled slightly, his mind clearly turning the words over. "*Hidden in plain sight.*" His voice was soft, reflective. "It could mean a threat from within. Someone in the clan."

Dawncloud's ears flattened slightly. "I don't want to think that. But we need to be careful."

Thunderstar's voice cut through the air like claws through ice. "Or the danger is Dapplepaw herself."

Both cats turned toward him in stunned silence. Dawncloud's breath caught. "Thunderstar—"

"She's the one who's been sneaking off," Thunderstar continued, his voice low, almost thoughtful. "Meeting PineClan, pulling herself into the center of this storm. It's not paranoia to wonder why StarClan keeps showing her at the heart of it."

Shadestep's fur bristled at the accusation, but his voice remained steady. "Dapplepaw is my apprentice." The quiet steel in his words was far more dangerous than a raised voice. "I know her better than anyone. If she's part of the prophecy, it's because she's in danger — not because she's the threat."

"You can't know that," Thunderstar said, amber eyes narrowing.

"I know enough." Shadestep's stance was relaxed, but his presence felt larger, sharper. "StarClan wouldn't send a warning like this if Dapplepaw were the danger itself. They would have told us to stop her — not protect her."

Dawncloud nodded quickly, seizing the moment. "There are plenty of cats stirring trouble — Smokefoot's temper grows worse every day, and Cinderclaw's paranoia spreads like sickness. But Dapplepaw? She's not the enemy here."

"None of them are sneaking off to meet with PineClan behind my back," Thunderstar said coldly. "None of them are standing on the ice."

The silence after his words was heavy, thick with tension and unsaid fears. Dawncloud glanced at Shadestep, silently hoping for

some shared reassurance, but the black tom's expression was locked in that unreadable calm.

Thunderstar turned without another word, his massive frame slipping through the entrance, leaving only a cold draft in his place.

Shadestep lingered a moment longer. His sharp eyes found Dawncloud's, and for a brief moment, his voice softened — just slightly. "I'll talk to him," he said. "He's been different since PineClan started pushing our borders. Rash. Distrustful."

Dawncloud exhaled slowly. "Keep an eye on Dapplepaw. She's already carrying too much."

Shadestep gave a single, solemn nod before vanishing into the shadows, leaving Dawncloud alone with the frost and her thoughts.

Chapter 12

The morning air was crisp and fresh, carrying the scent of dew-soaked grass and damp earth through StormClan's camp. A faint breeze stirred the leaves at the entrance, rustling the brambles that formed the protective barrier around their home. The sky stretched above them in soft hues of pale blue and lavender, the first rays of sunlight creeping over the treetops, casting long shadows over the waking camp. Warriors stirred from their nests, stretching stiff limbs and murmuring drowsy greetings as they emerged from their dens. The sharp tang of moss clung to their fur, a lingering reminder of sleep not yet fully shaken.

Dapplepaw sat alone near the fresh-kill pile, her shoulders hunched as she absently pawed at a small mouse. The prey remained untouched, its limp body rolling slightly beneath her claws. She wasn't hungry. Sleep had been fleeting, her dreams twisted into a haze of flickering images she barely understood.

But as much as her dream haunted her, she couldn't let herself dwell on it now. Her mind remained fixed on something far more immediate—the gathering.She replayed the night's events over and over, sifting through every tense exchange, every veiled threat, every piece of information Oakpaw had let slip. The way Maplestar and Thunderstar had bristled, their words sharp as claws, left a sour taste in her mouth. This wasn't just rivalry anymore. It was something deeper, something dangerous. And if she was right—if Birchshadow and Smokefoot were involved—then StormClan was walking into a battle they didn't understand.

A movement at the warriors' den caught her eye. Sootfur padded into the clearing, his dark-furred pelt still slightly ruffled from sleep. He arched his back in a long, lazy stretch before shaking out his fur, sending a few stray bits of moss fluttering to the ground. His yellow-green eyes scanned the clearing until they landed on her, sharpening with concern the moment their gazes met.He trotted over, his tail flicking as he settled beside her. "Hey, you look like

you didn't get a wink of sleep," he observed, studying her with quiet worry. "Let me guess—Smokefoot?"

Dapplepaw shook her head, her tail curling around her paws. "Not this time," she murmured. Then she hesitated. "Well... not directly."

Sootfur tilted his head, ears pricking forward. "Alright, now I'm curious. What happened?"

Dapplepaw cast a quick glance around camp, making sure no one was within earshot. Most of the clan was still stretching out the last remnants of sleep or sharing tongues near their dens, too preoccupied to pay them any mind. Still, she lowered her voice. "I spoke to a PineClan apprentice last night. Oakpaw."

Sootfur's eyes widened slightly, and he leaned in. "Wait—you actually talked to one of them?" His voice was hushed but tinged with excitement. "And they didn't claw your ears off?"

Dapplepaw gave a half-hearted snort. "He wasn't exactly friendly, but he wasn't outright hostile either. I asked him about Birchshadow and Smokefoot, but he wouldn't give me a straight answer. He acted like he knew something, but..." She frowned, raking her claws through the dirt. "It was like he was afraid to say too much."

Sootfur's amusement faded, his ears twitching thoughtfully. "That's suspicious. If PineClan's apprentices are acting like they have something to hide, maybe Birchshadow really is involved in something shady."

"That's what I'm afraid of." Dapplepaw exhaled, the tension in her shoulders refusing to ease. "And the way the gathering ended... Maplestar and Thunderstar practically declared war on each other. If things escalate, and we don't know the full truth about what's going on, StormClan could end up walking straight into a trap."

Sootfur's expression darkened. He glanced toward the leader's den, where Thunderstar was still inside, likely discussing the gathering with Shadestep and a few senior warriors. "So what's the plan? Are you going to talk to Thunderstar?"

Dapplepaw hesitated, her claws kneading the ground. "Not yet. No one will listen to me—not after everything that's happened. But maybe... maybe Dawncloud will."

Sootfur blinked, then nodded in understanding. "She is our medicine cat. She might know something we don't." He flicked his tail. "And if nothing else, she'll listen."

Dapplepaw exhaled slowly, some of the weight on her chest easing just a little. "I hope so."

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The sun had climbed higher in the sky by the time Dapplepaw found herself padding alongside Dawncloud, the she-cat moving with a quiet grace as they wove their way through the undergrowth. The pale cream-colored medicine cat led the way, her ears flicking at the distant chirp of birdsong and the rustling of leaves in the gentle morning breeze. Sunlight filtered through the towering trees, dappling the forest floor in shifting patterns of gold and shadow. The faint scent of damp earth and wildflowers clung to the air, mingling with the crisp freshness of the nearby river.

Dapplepaw let her paws carry her forward, her mind still tangled with the events of the gathering and the strange unease that had settled in her chest ever since. She hadn't intended to confide in Dawncloud, not yet, but something about the she-cat's steady presence made it easier to breathe, easier to think.

"I appreciate you helping me gather these, Dapplepaw," Dawncloud said warmly, her voice carrying over the rustling of ferns as they neared a patch of wild-growing herbs near the riverbank. "Stormwhisper has been complaining about her aching joints again, and fresh marigold will help."

Dapplepaw flicked her ear. "Of course. I don't mind a change of pace."

Dawncloud purred in approval, her tail brushing against Dapplepaw's side before she focused on searching for herbs among the grass. They walked in comfortable silence for a while, the

sounds of the forest wrapping around them like a familiar melody—the gentle lapping of the river against the rocks, the distant chatter of a squirrel darting through the treetops, the rhythmic crunch of their paws on damp leaves.

Dapplepaw hesitated, gathering her thoughts like stones in her paws before finally speaking, her voice quieter this time. "Dawncloud... can I ask you something?"

The she-cat paused, her hazel eyes settling on Dapplepaw with quiet curiosity. "Of course. What's on your mind?"

Dapplepaw hesitated, her claws flexing against the cool earth. It was one thing to think about the dream over and over in her own head, but saying it out loud made it feel more... real. And that unsettled her. Taking a steadying breath, she forced herself to speak.

"I had a dream a few nights ago," she admitted. "It felt... different. Like it wasn't just a regular dream."

Dawncloud's ears twitched, and she sat down among the tall grasses, her expression turning thoughtful. "Tell me what you remember."

Dapplepaw swallowed, drawing her tail closer to her side. "I was at Silver Falls... but something was wrong. The whole place was silent—not peaceful, just... empty." She shivered slightly at the memory. "The trees were darker, their branches twisted like claws, and the sky—it wasn't normal. It was this strange, sickly shade of gray, like a storm was about to break, but no wind came."

She dug her claws into the soil, trying to ground herself. "Then I smelled it—blood. It was coming from the undergrowth, pooling at the roots and draining into the water. I couldn't see where it was coming from, just the deep red spreading across the pool."

Dawncloud listened intently, her face unreadable, but Dapplepaw didn't miss the way her tail-tip twitched—subtle, but a sign of concern.

"That's... unsettling," Dawncloud murmured, her voice measured. "And you're certain it wasn't just an ordinary dream?"

Dapplepaw met her gaze, determined. "It felt too real. Like StarClan was trying to show me something, but I don't understand what."

For a long moment, Dawncloud was silent, her hazel eyes distant as if searching for meaning in the whisper of the wind. When she finally spoke, her voice was careful. "Dreams like these are rarely straightforward, Dapplepaw. If StarClan sent this to you, then it means something important."

Dapplepaw nodded slowly, her thoughts racing before she cautiously asked, "Do you think it has something to do with PineClan?" She wasn't sure where Dawncloud stood on the growing tensions, and she didn't want to risk revealing too much if the medicine cat wanted to stay outside of clan conflicts. She knew it was her duty to look beyond them and see every cat as themselves and not just their clan loyalties. However, Dapplepaw was curious to know what she personally felt.

Dawncloud let out a slow breath, glancing toward the river where the water glistened beneath the sun's light. "It's possible. If something is going to happen, then your dream could be a warning." She frowned, her ears twitching. "A very honest warning. It might mean that cats could get seriously hurt."

Dapplepaw's fur prickled, her tail lashing slightly. "Then we need to figure out what it is before it's too late."

Dawncloud turned to look at her fully, her gaze steady yet kind. She reached out with her tail, resting it lightly against Dapplepaw's flank. "We will," she assured her. "But remember, StarClan's messages are not always meant to be unraveled all at once. Watch. Listen. Be patient."

Dapplepaw bit back a frustrated sigh. She was tired of being told to be patient. If StarClan truly was warning her about something—about cats getting hurt, maybe even dying—then waiting felt like the worst thing she could do. She wanted answers now. She wanted to do something.

But she wouldn't argue with Dawncloud.

Dapplepaw exhaled, forcing herself to nod. "I'll try," she said, though her voice carried an edge of defiance. "But I can't just sit back and do nothing."

Dawncloud's whiskers twitched in quiet amusement. "I didn't expect you would."

They finished gathering herbs in silence, but Dapplepaw's mind was far from still.

If her dream was truly a message from StarClan, then she couldn't ignore it.

The storm was rising.

Chapter 13

The days bled together, the weight of suspicion hanging so thickly over Dapplepaw's pelt that it felt like a second skin. At first, she could almost ignore it — the way her clanmates' gazes lingered a heartbeat too long, the half-whispered conversations that always seemed to shift the moment she walked by. The uncomfortable ripple of silence that followed her into the clearing.

She could explain all of that away. They were worried about PineClan, weren't they? Every cat was on edge. But the sharp edge of paranoia cut deepest when it came from within her own camp — from her own leader.

Thunderstar's eyes found her every time she entered the clearing, unwavering and sharp, like a thorn wedged beneath her fur. No matter where she was — sharing prey with Sootfur, fetching moss for the elders, even crouching beside Dawncloud outside the medicine den — she could feel his gaze anchoring her to the ground. It was no longer subtle. The way he watched her was the way a hawk tracked a mouse, waiting for it to dart in the wrong direction.

The tension between them became a permanent fixture, like the mist that curled through the forest in early leaf-fall — cold, heavy, impossible to shake.

She tried to ignore it. She told herself she was imagining things — until she wasn't.

"I want you with Shadestep today," Thunderstar's voice was calm, almost casual, but there was no room for argument. He didn't even lift his head from where he sat beside the fresh-kill pile, pawing through the remains of a vole. "Sootfur can go with Thistletail."

Dapplepaw's ears flicked back. "But Sootfur and I—"

"You'll go with Shadestep," Thunderstar repeated, and this time his

voice held the cool, brittle finality of ice settling over a frozen stream.

The muscles along Dapplepaw's shoulders tightened, her frustration flaring like a fire too long smothered, but she swallowed it down and dipped her head in silent obedience. Fine. Maybe Thunderstar just wanted her to get more advanced training with her mentor. That made sense — didn't it?

Except it happened again the next day. And the day after that. And the day after that.

Each morning, she found her patrol assignments changed at the last moment — always paired with Shadestep, or Thistletail, or even Thunderstar himself. Never with Sootfur. Never with Cinderclaw. Never with any cat she might speak to freely. The pattern was too precise, too deliberate to be chance. It was control.

The final crack came when Sootfur padded up to her after the dusk patrol, his eyes bright with excitement.

"Fox-scent near the western border," he reported. "We're reinforcing the scent markers— want to come? Could use an extra set of paws."

Dapplepaw had already risen to her feet, eager to get out of camp for a while, when Thunderstar's voice sliced across the clearing.

"No." His command was sharp, leaving no room for argument. "Cinderclaw can go with you, Sootfur. Dapplepaw — you'll stay and sort herbs with Dawncloud."

Dapplepaw froze, the hot spark of anger leaping up in her chest before she could catch it. Her tail lashed once, unbidden, and she flattened it quickly, teeth gritted as she forced her expression into something neutral. The fury was a living thing, clawing at her throat, but she swallowed it whole and dipped her head in forced obedience.

She wouldn't give him the satisfaction of seeing her break.

But her patience was gone.

The next day, Shadestep took her out for battle training at the Thunder Hollow. The ground was damp from the morning's rain, the scent of wet earth thick in the air, but Dapplepaw hardly noticed. Every ounce of frustration — every sidelong glance, every whispered conversation, every forced pairing — burned beneath her skin like fire ants, building and building until it had nowhere left to go.

She attacked hard, too hard. Each strike was sharper than the last, her claws scything through the air, her movements less like training and more like the frantic desperation of a cat cornered with nowhere to run.

Shadestep parried, moving with the smoothness born of countless battles, but even he couldn't anticipate the reckless ferocity that drove her. She twisted sharply, claws grazing his ear before she even realized what she was doing.

Shadestep hissed sharply, rearing back.

"Enough!"

The snap of his voice cut through the haze of her frustration, and Dapplepaw staggered back, breath coming fast. Her wide eyes locked onto the thin line of red trailing down his ear.

"I—I'm so sorry!" Her voice cracked as she stumbled a step back, ears flattened in shame. "I didn't mean to—"

"It's alright," Shadestep said, his tone gentler than before, though his eyes still held a shadow of unease. He raised a paw, running it over the shallow scratch to stem the bleeding. "But that wasn't training. That was something else."

Dapplepaw's heart pounded in her chest, her fur hot with embarrassment and anger all tangled together. "What is Thunderstar's problem with me?" she blurted. "I'm being watched, followed like I'm a kit who can't set paw outside camp without a chaperone! Why?"

Shadestep exhaled slowly, his ears flicking back. "It's not personal, Dapplepaw."

"It sure feels personal!" she snapped. "What did I do? Is this because of what Smokefoot said all those moons ago? If Thunderstar thinks I'm some kind of traitor, he's wrong — you know that."

Shadestep's silence was louder than any accusation could have been.

Dapplepaw's stomach dropped, the fury in her chest suddenly hollowed out by cold. "He does think that, doesn't he?"

The deputy's tail flicked, his shoulders slumping beneath the invisible weight Thunderstar had laid across them both. "Thunderstar is under a lot of pressure. The tension with PineClan is worse than ever — and when leaders are desperate, they look for threats, even where there aren't any."

"So I'm a threat now?" Her voice cracked, hurt bleeding through the frustration. "After everything I've done? After everything I've given up for this clan — I'm the one he's suspicious of?"

Shadestep's eyes softened with something like regret. "I don't agree with him," he said quietly. "I told him that."

"Then why does it still feel like I'm being punished?" Her claws curled into the soft earth, her voice trembling with the effort to hold back the storm inside her. "Why does it feel like there's something no one's telling me?"

Shadestep opened his mouth, then closed it again. His gaze slid away, ears angling back as if the trees themselves might overhear them. "There are things you don't understand yet," he said at last, his voice careful. "Things Thunderstar thinks he's protecting you from."

Dapplepaw let out a sharp, humorless laugh. "He's not protecting me — he's suffocating me! If he doesn't trust me, why doesn't he just say it to my face?"

Shadestep said nothing.

Dapplepaw took a step closer, her eyes narrowing. "You know, don't you?" Her voice dropped low, trembling with disbelief. "You know why he's acting like this — why he doesn't trust me — and you're not telling me."

"Don't!" she cut him off, her voice sharp as thorns. "Don't treat me like a kit. If I'm old enough to be suspected of treason, I'm old enough to know why."

For a moment, Shadestep's resolve wavered. Something flickered in his eyes — guilt, regret, fear — but whatever truth lingered there, he swallowed it down and shook his head.

"Some things aren't mine to tell," he said softly.

Dapplepaw's breath caught, her anger simmering into cold resolve. "Then whose are they?"

Shadestep didn't answer.

Without another word, she turned and stalked toward camp, her paws heavy with frustration, confusion, and the bitter taste of betrayal.

If no one would give her answers, she would find them herself.

Chapter 14

The moon hung high, a pale, watchful eye casting silver light across the forest. The air was sharp and cold, cutting against Dapplepaw's face like claws of ice as she slipped between the worn stones guarding StormClan's entrance. Every breath she took curled like ghostly mist in the night air, but the chill in her chest had nothing to do with the weather.

Shadestep's words still echoed in her mind, the guarded caution in his voice, the refusal to say too much. It was Thunderstar's ever-present suspicion, though, that clung to her like burrs in her pelt — constant, unshakable, suffocating. She had risked everything to prove her loyalty, yet to her leader, she was still the apprentice who couldn't be trusted. Still a danger.

If they were always going to see her that way, why should she care what lines she crossed?

The forest at night was a world reborn — shadows stretched long and liquid, moonlight dripping through bare branches like silver rain. Dapplepaw's paws barely stirred the frost-crusted grass as she walked, the silence pressing around her, broken only by the crackle of ice beneath her claws.

She hadn't planned on going so far, but her paws had a will of their own, carrying her along familiar paths until the faint scent drifted toward her, subtle but unmistakable.

Smokefoot.

Dapplepaw froze, her breath catching. Her ears pricked toward the dark figure moving ahead, his lean frame sliding between the trees with practiced ease. He was heading for the border — no, beyond it — toward the whispering rush of Silver Falls. The falls had always felt like a boundary between worlds, a place where the living forest met the unseen wilds beyond, where secrets could sink beneath the water and be carried away.

She had followed him once before — and been caught. This time, she would not make the same mistake.

Lowering herself into a perfect crouch, Dapplepaw melted into the frost-tinged undergrowth. Her belly brushed the ground, each step slow, deliberate, her ears flicking to catch the faintest sound of Smokefoot's passage. Her heart pounded against her ribs, but she made no sound, her movements weaving seamlessly with the forest's natural breath.

The soft roar of the falls grew louder as the trees began to thin, the sky opening wide above. A veil of moonlit mist rose from the cascading water, shimmering silver as it caught the light. The air was damp here, heavy with the scent of moss and riverstone. Dapplepaw slid into the shadow of a holly bush, its sharp leaves pricking her fur as she pressed low to the ground.

Smokefoot stood at the water's edge, his ears twitching, tail flicking in restless arcs. The minutes stretched like seasons. Dapplepaw's muscles burned with the strain of stillness, but she didn't move. Not yet.

Then, from the opposite side of the clearing, a figure emerged from the mist.

Birchshadow.

The PineClan tom walked like the shadows themselves obeyed him, his silver-gray fur rippling with each step. His eyes, narrow and cold, swept across the clearing before settling on Smokefoot. There was no greeting, no warmth. Just purpose, coiled tight beneath the surface.

"Smokefoot," Birchshadow's voice was quiet, smooth as a snake's glide, "I was beginning to wonder if you'd lost your resolve."

Smokefoot's ears pinned back, the dark-furred tom's stance bristling with tension. "Don't push me, Birchshadow," he growled. "I'm here. That's enough."

Birchshadow stepped closer, not stopping until they stood nearly

shoulder to shoulder. His eyes gleamed, sharp as thorn-tips. "It's not enough. StormClan has held Silver Falls for long enough. That ends soon."

Dapplepaw's claws dug into the frozen soil beneath her paws. Her breath came in slow, measured pulls, but her heart hammered in her ears. PineClan had always wanted Silver Falls — it was one of StormClan's richest hunting grounds, and held the only fresh, unfrozen water through leaf-bare. But this wasn't about hunting rights.

This was war.

Smokefoot's tail lashed once, a single stroke of dark anger. "We fought for this land," he muttered, though there was no conviction in his voice — only the hollow echo of excuses worn thin.

Birchshadow's smile was all teeth. "And you'll fight for it again. But this time, on our terms."

Dapplepaw's stomach twisted. She had been aware of Smokefoot's disloyalty before, but hearing it — witnessing it here, under the open sky — made it real in a way that struck her to the core.

"StormClan is already tearing itself apart," Birchshadow said smoothly, his gaze never leaving Smokefoot's face. "Thunderstar is so busy chasing his own shadow, you could lead his warriors right into the falls and drown them before he'd even notice. One well-timed skirmish, and all his suspicions will turn inward. He'll destroy his own warriors for us."

Smokefoot's claws curled into the mossy bank, and for a heartbeat, Dapplepaw thought — hoped — that he would refuse. That some flicker of loyalty would surface, some memory of what it meant to stand beside his Clanmates. But the hope died when Smokefoot exhaled sharply, his shoulders sagging with resignation.

"Fine," Smokefoot growled. "But if you so much as breathe my name to your leader—"

"I wouldn't dream of it," Birchshadow said, his voice as soft and

cutting as falling snow. "Trust is the foundation of every good alliance."

Dapplepaw's muscles ached with the effort of staying still, her whole body trembling as the truth crashed over her like the falls themselves. This was treachery on a scale she hadn't dared imagine — not just a rogue warrior's ambition, but a carefully woven conspiracy, with Smokefoot's claws tangled deep in the threads.

She had to tell someone. But who? Thunderstar would doubt her every word. Shadestep would hesitate, torn between loyalty and caution. No one would believe her — not the apprentice who'd already been branded as suspicious.

A slow, creeping shiver slid down her spine, every hair along her back prickling to attention.

Birchshadow was looking directly at her.

His head never turned, his stance never shifted, but his eyes — those cold, gleaming eyes — locked onto the holly bush where she crouched, unblinking, unwavering. His smile deepened, a predator's smile, the kind that knew the mouse was already in the trap.

"Remember, Smokefoot," Birchshadow said, and this time, Dapplepaw knew the words were meant for her as much as for Smokefoot. "We're always being watched."

Smokefoot's head jerked up, alarm flickering in his eyes. "What—?"

"Relax," Birchshadow purred. "It's just a reminder to be careful. You never know who might be listening."

Dapplepaw's breath caught painfully in her throat. Slowly, inch by inch, she began to slide backward, her paws trembling with the effort to stay silent. Birchshadow's eyes never wavered.

Not until she had slipped into the deeper shadows of the forest, her heart pounding a wild rhythm against her ribs, did she turn and bolt.

The forest was a blur — frost, branches, and dark earth spinning

past her paws as her mind raced even faster. Smokefoot was a traitor. Birchshadow knew she was there. And somewhere, in the dark tangle of treachery and silence, was the truth.

A truth no one would believe — unless she found a way to prove it herself to Thunderstar.

Dapplepaw's breath tore from her throat as she ran, the cold air burning like fire in her chest.

But she had no choice but to be the one who uncovered the rot spreading through her Clan.

No matter what it cost.

Chapter 15

Dapplepaw lay awake long after returning to her nest, her mind spinning with everything she had seen. The secret meeting between Smokefoot and Birchshadow, the way Birchshadow seemed to know exactly where she was hiding, and the unmistakable threat hanging over her Clan. Not even the familar scent of moss and fur nor the rhythmic rise and fall of Shadowpaw's breathing could soothe her thoughts. Every time she her eyes, she saw Smokefoot's tense shoulders, Birchshadow's flicking tail, and the gleam of calculation in their eyes. The conversation echoed in her head, looping endlessly, a whisper of foreboding that refused to quiet.

Not matter how many times she replated the scene, the conclusion was always the same: she *had* to tell Thunderstar. But how could she make him believe her?

The weight of her past accusations sat heavy on her chest. Thunderstar already saw her as too curious for her own good, a meddler in things beyond her station. And recently, the leader now saw her as a traitor of some sort. Even if she went to him with only her word, would he even listen? He hadn't before. She had no proof. Only her own eyes and the sick twist in her gut that told her danger was closing in. And worse, if Smokefoot caught wind of her suspicions, he could easily turn the Clan against even more than they already were.

Dapplepaw squeezed her eyes shut at her whirling thoughts and the fear creeping along her spine. She couldn't let fear stop her. StormClan had to know.

Morning came too soon. Pale light bled through the bramble walls of the apprentice den, casting thin golden streaks across the mossy nests. Dapplepaw's limbs felt like stone, her eyes gritty with exhaustion, but she forced herself up. Every muscle in her body protested as she stretched, her decision still weighing on her shoulders. Today. She would find Thunderstar as soon a scamp stirred. Before Smokefoot could twist things against her once more,

she'd take the risk and tell her leader what she had seen.

The camp was just walking when she slipped outside. Frost clung to the edges of leaves, and the crisp scent of leaf-fall filled the air. Warriors stretched in the cold, their breath misting, and the first patrols were already gathering near the thorn barrier. Dapplepaw's gaze flicked toward Thunderstar's den. He was likely still asleep, but if she just waited—

"Dapplepaw!"

Shadestep's voice cut across the clearing, calm but firm. The deputy stood with his tail raised, beckoning her over. "You're with Mistfeather, Sootfur, and Shadowpaw on the hunting patrol. We need a good haul after yesterday's light catch."

Dapplepaw's heart plummeted. She needed to speak with Thunderstar, but if she refused the orders now, she'd only draw unwanted suspicion.

"But I—" she started, then caught herself. If she protested too much, it would only make things worse, especially given the strained relationship she had with the deputy since their argument. She swallowed her frustration. "Okay," she muttered.

She sighed and followed the patrol. It would have to wait until after.

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The forest was cold, the air sharp with leaf-fall's chill. Dapplepaw stalked silently behind Mistfeather and Shadowpaw, barely aware of Sootfur matching her pace. Frost-laced leaves crunched underpaw, but her ears strained for any sound beyond that, her mind refusing to stay in the present.

Birchshadow's voice echoed in her head. *Thunderstar will tear his own warriors apart with suspicion.*

A shiver crawled down her spine. She knew all it would take was a spark, a single skirmish. Every rustle of leaves felt like a threat. Every shifting shadow reminded her that Smokefoot might be

watching, already guessing she had overheard too much.

"Dapplepaw?"

Sootfur's voice pulled her back to the present. She turned, meeting his yellow-green eyes. "You're falling behind."

"Sorry," she mumbled, shaking herself.

Sootfur studied her, concern flickering in his gaze. "Are you okay? I've barely seen you this past moon."

Dapplepaw hesitated. "A lot is happening."

He nodded slowly, as if he understood more than she had said. After all, he was the only cat who knew about the situation with Smokefoot—and the only one who believed her.

"Let's get your mind off it and do some hunting," he suggested.

Dapplepaw had never heard anything better. She nodded and padded off, letting her nose guide her.

The scent of squirrel drifted toward her, and she dropped into a hunter's crouch. Her muscles tensed as she crept forward, focusing on the tiny movements of her prey. She was just about to pounce when a flicker of movement out of the corner of her eye made her freeze.

Not prey. Fur.

A lean orange-and-brown tabby crouched low behind a thornbush, eyes wide with urgency.

Oakpaw.

Dapplepaw recognized him instantly, despite the unfamiliar scent clinging to his fur—some kind of herb masking his natural smell. Surprise widened her eyes. Their last encounter had been anything but friendly. What was a PineClan warrior doing so deep in StormClan territory?

Oakpaw flicked his ear, motioning her closer.

Dapplepaw hesitated, glancing back. Sootfur was out of sight. Taking a steadying breath, she slipped toward Oakpaw, her heart hammering.

"What are you doing here?" she hissed, her fur bristling with nerves. "This isn't your territory."

"I wouldn't be here if it wasn't important," Oakpaw whispered, flattening his ears. "There's something you need to know."

Dapplepaw narrowed her eyes. "Is it about Smokefoot?"

Oakpaw didn't answer right away, but the tension in his body was enough.

"Not here," he said quickly. "Meet me at the Great Oak tonight. It'll be safer there."

Dapplepaw frowned. "Safer? You're already risking being caught." But even as she spoke, the answer was dawning on her.

"Please," Oakpaw urged, his voice low but insistent. "I can't explain now, but you need to know what's happening before it's too late."

Her claws dug into the earth. Her mind spun. If Oakpaw was this scared and reaching out to her, something was very wrong.

"I'll be there," she promised.

Relief flickered in Oakpaw's eyes. Without another word, he slipped away, vanishing into the undergrowth as if he had never been there at all.

Dapplepaw remained still for a heartbeat longer, the cold air stinging her nose. Somewhere out there, Birchshadow was waiting. Smokefoot was hiding secrets. And if Thunderstar wouldn't believe her, then Oakpaw might be the only cat who could help her unravel the truth—before it was too late.

With a deep breath, she turned back toward the patrol, her paws

heavy, but her resolve set like stone.

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Another sleepless night.

Dapplepaw moved like a shadow through the undergrowth, each step deliberate, though her heart pounded with every rustle of the leaves beneath her paws. Above the moon hung high in the sky, a pale silver eye watching over the forest. The Great Oak loomed ahead, its sprawling branches stretching like outstretched limbs, its ancient roots weaving through the earth like veins. The mingling scents of all four Clans clung to the bark—a silent reminder that she was stepping into neutral ground, but tonight, neutrality didn't exist.

Ears pricked, she scanned the darkened clearing, every muscle tense, waiting.

A rustle to her left.

Dapplepaw whirled, claws unsheathing instinctively.

"It's me," a low voice murmured.

A figure stepped from the shadows, his lean frame bathed in moonlight.

Oakpaw.

Dapplepaw exhaled, her claws retracting, but as she took in his appearance, she hesitated. He was... different. The last time she had seen him, he had been crouched behind a bush hidden from her view. Now, he stood taller, his frame stronger, his muscles more defined beneath his sleek pelt. There was something else, too—something in his posture. Confidence. Authority.

"You got your warrior name," she murmured, half statement, half question.

Oakpaw blinked, as if momentarily caught off guard, then dipped his head. "Oakfoot now," he confirmed. "I earned my name a few

sunrises ago."

Despite the tension coiling in her chest, Dapplepaw nodded. "Congratulations," she said, and to her surprise, she meant it.

Oakfoot gave a short nod, but his expression remained tight, the confidence flickering in his gaze giving way to unease. He glanced around, his ears twitching, as if ensuring they were truly alone.

"I didn't ask you here for that," he said, voice low and urgent. "I needed to warn you."

Dapplepaw stiffened, every hair along her spine rising. "Warn me? About what?"

Oakfoot hesitated. He studied her, his yellow eyes narrowing slightly, as if weighing whether to trust her with what he knew. Then, taking a slow breath, he stepped closer.

"Birchshadow," he murmured, his voice barely above a whisper.

The name sent a shiver through Dapplepaw. Birchshadow. The mere mention of the PineClan deputy made her claws itch.

Oakfoot's tail flicked, his expression dark. "I overheard him talking in camp," he continued. "Not just to one or two cats—but to several. He has supporters, Dapplepaw. And they see you as a problem."

Dapplepaw's breath caught in her throat. Supporters? She had known Birchshadow was dangerous, but she hadn't realized he had others standing behind him. Cats willing to do his bidding. And now, she was a target.

"A threat?" she asked, her voice quieter now. "Why?"

Oakfoot's ears flattened. "Because Smokefoot can't—or won't—deal with you himself." He leaned in, his voice urgent. "Birchshadow said you were 'too curious for your own good.' That you needed to be watched. Maybe worse."

The words sent ice coursing through Dapplepaw's veins.

She had suspected that Birchshadow wouldn't simply let her go unchallenged, not after what she had overheard, but hearing it spoken aloud—knowing that others had been in that conversation—made it all the more real.

"How much do you know about his plans?" she asked, forcing her voice to remain steady.

Oakfoot hesitated again, and something flickered in his eyes—uncertainty.

Dapplepaw's tail lashed. "Oakfoot, this is bigger than just us," she pressed. "I know Smokefoot's trying to get rid of Thunderstar. And Birchshadow—he's doing the same in your Clan, isn't he?" She took a step closer, her green eyes locking onto his. "If you know something, you need to tell me."

Oakfoot exhaled sharply, glancing toward the trees as if checking for unseen ears. Then, at last, he spoke.

"They're planning an attack," he admitted.

Dapplepaw's claws dug into the ground. She had suspected as much, but hearing it confirmed sent a fresh wave of urgency through her.

"It's going to be disguised as a border dispute," Oakfoot added. "They'll make it seem like a skirmish gone too far, but that's not what it really is. Birchshadow and Smokefoot—they want chaos. They want to weaken your Clan from the inside before making their move."

Dapplepaw's chest tightened. An attack disguised as a border fight. It was the perfect cover. If warriors died, it wouldn't look like an assassination. It would look like the cost of war.

Her throat was dry. "Do you know when?"

Oakfoot shook his head. "No. But soon." His expression darkened. "And Dapplepaw—you need to be careful. If they think you know too much, I don't think this battle will end well for you."

For a moment, neither of them spoke.

A breeze whispered through the branches above, rustling the leaves. The Great Oak stood silent, indifferent to their conversation, indifferent to the danger that loomed over them both.

Dapplepaw swallowed hard. She had no choice. She had to act.

"Then I have to stop them before it's too late," she said, more to herself than to him.

Oakfoot frowned. "What if you can't?"

Dapplepaw met his gaze. Fear clawed at the edges of her mind, but she refused to let it take hold. Instead, something steadier burned inside her—a resolve that hardened in her chest like stone.

"I'll protect my Clan, Oakfoot," she said, her voice firm. "Even at the cost of my own life."

Oakfoot held her gaze for a long moment, something unreadable passing through his expression. Then, slowly, he nodded.

"Just don't do anything stupid," he replied. "I'd like to see you alive at the next Gathering."

Dapplepaw exhaled, her mind already racing with what she had to do. She turned her gaze toward the darkened forest, where her camp lay in wait—unaware of the danger creeping toward them.

She had a choice to make.

And she wouldn't fail.

Chapter 16

By the time Dapplepaw slunk back into camp, the sky had begun its slow shift from the deep indigo of night to the soft lavender of dawn. The jagged mountain peaks cut against the horizon, their rugged edges catching the first golden light of the rising sun. Shadows stretched long across the stone walls of the camp, and the crisp scent of morning dew clung to her fur as she slipped through the entrance. Her paws dragged with exhaustion, every muscle in her body aching from the long, tense night. Yet she knew—even if she buried herself in the softest nest in the apprentice's den—sleep would not come.

Still, she allowed herself the luxury of sinking into the familiar warmth of her nest, sighing as the comforting scent of moss and her den mate, Shadowpaw, wrapped around her. The moment of peace was fleeting, however. Oakfoot's warning pressed against her chest like a heavy stone, its weight unrelenting. But she would not let it break her.

She was a threat.

That meant she was getting close.

The thought burned in her mind, chasing away her fatigue and replacing it with a sharp, electric resolve. She curled tightly in her nest, her green eyes locked on the bramble-woven entrance of the apprentices' den, though she did not truly see it. Instead, she saw Birchshadow's cold, calculating stare. She saw Smokefoot's knowing smirk, the way his lips curled as if he held a secret she would never be privy to. She saw the darkness that lurked beneath their pelts, the secrets they hid so carefully, as if woven into their very fur.

They were planning something greater than the attack Oakfoot had warned her about. Something dangerous enough that they wanted her silenced.

But they wouldn't. She wouldn't let them.

A soft murmur broke through her thoughts, and Dapplepaw blinked back to reality as Shadowpaw stirred in his nest beside her, stretching with a groggy yawn. His dark fur was ruffled, his yellow eyes still half-lidded as he glanced in her direction.

"You're up early," he muttered, his voice thick with sleep.

Dapplepaw hesitated for a fraction of a heartbeat before responding. "Didn't sleep much."

Shadowpaw snorted, flexing his claws against the moss beneath him. "You and me both. Training's been brutal lately."

Dapplepaw flicked an ear in agreement, though training was the least of her worries. Pushing herself up, she stretched, shaking out the stiffness in her legs before padding toward the entrance. The familiar scents of damp earth and fresh moss greeted her as she stepped into the clearing.

Camp was stirring to life. Warriors gathered near the center, murmuring among themselves, tails flicking in idle conversation. The scent of freshly caught prey drifted from the pile, but Dapplepaw barely noticed.

Her gaze locked onto the warriors' den.

Smokefoot stood at its entrance, speaking in hushed tones with Cinderclaw. His posture was taut, his ears flicking as he leaned in close to the other warrior. Dapplepaw narrowed her eyes, straining to catch even a whisper of their conversation, but the morning bustle swallowed their voices.

Then, as if sensing her gaze, Smokefoot turned.

Their eyes met. His were sharp, assessing. For a moment, neither of them moved. The tension between them was thick, pressing against her chest like the mist that rolled off the riverbanks at dawn.

Then he smirked. Slow. Knowing.

Dapplepaw's fur bristled, but she forced herself to remain still. She would not look away first. She would not let him see even a flicker

of fear.

Instead, she turned sharply and stalked toward the camp entrance, her heart pounding against her ribs. She needed to train.

Shadestep was already waiting for her, his dark pelt blending into the shadows near the entrance. He did not move as Dapplepaw approached, only flicked his tail in acknowledgment before speaking.

"You're late."

Dapplepaw bit back a retort, her claws digging into the earth. "I came straight here."

Shadestep didn't argue, but the unspoken tension between them settled like a heavy cloud. Their relationship had never fully mended since their last argument, and part of her ached to bridge that distance—to tell him everything. To make him understand why she couldn't let this go.

But she knew better.

So she said nothing.

The silence lingered as they made their way to Thunder Hollow. When they arrived, she threw herself into their training drills, channeling her frustration into every strike, every dodge. Her claws scraped against the dirt, her muscles burned with exertion, but she welcomed the ache. It grounded her. It reminded her that she was still standing. That she was still fighting.

At some point, Shadowpaw arrived with his mentor, Mistfeather, joining them for sparring practice. His lean frame darted across the clearing, quick as a fish in a stream, but Dapplepaw was faster. She sidestepped his strike, sweeping his legs out from under him in a single fluid motion.

Shadowpaw hit the ground with a grunt, groaning dramatically. "Mouse-dung, that was unfair."

Dapplepaw smirked, feeling a bit lighter after the victory. "In battle,

there's no such thing as fair."

Shadestep, watching from a few tail-lengths away, gave a small nod of approval. "Good. Again."

The session stretched on until their fur was slick with sweat, their breaths coming in ragged gasps. When Shadestep and Mistfeather finally dismissed them, Shadowpaw flopped onto the ground beside her, his chest rising and falling in exhaustion.

"That was brutal," he groaned.

"You'll thank him later," Dapplepaw said dryly, stretching out her sore limbs.

Shadowpaw snorted but didn't argue. A moment passed, then another, before he rolled onto his side and gave her a thoughtful look.

"Are you still wondering if something's off about Smokefoot?" he asked suddenly.

Dapplepaw's ears twitched. "You've noticed something?"

Shadowpaw hesitated, his claws kneading the dirt. "He's been different since the skirmish. I mean, he's always been hot-headed, but now? It's like he's asking for a battle."

Dapplepaw's tail curled. That wasn't surprising, but it still sent a shiver down her spine. "Has he said anything?"

Shadowpaw shook his head. "Not really. But I did hear him talking to Cinderclaw a few nights ago, near the warriors' den."

Dapplepaw's breath caught. "What did they say?"

Shadowpaw frowned, thinking. "I couldn't hear much. Smokefoot said something about 'moving forward.' Cinderclaw didn't say much, but she didn't argue either."

His eyes met hers, sharp and serious. "Dapplepaw... what's going on? Is my mother in trouble?"

Dapplepaw hesitated.

Shadowpaw was sharp—he wouldn't accept a vague excuse. Could she drag him into this, knowing what it might cost? Smokefoot was his father. He didn't particularly enjoy his father's presence, but they *were* kin. Would he even believe her?

Before she could decide, Shadestep's voice cut through the clearing like a whip.

"Dapplepaw. Shadowpaw. If you have time to gossip, you have time for more training."

Shadowpaw groaned, pushing himself up. "You've already dismissed us!" He argued as he padded over to Mistfeather and Shadestep.

Dapplepaw stood as well and followed Shadowpaw. However, she wasn't paying attention to the way Shadowpaw was trying to convince their mentors to not give them extra training. Instead, she was thinking of Smokefoot and just how many of her own clanmates were on his side.

She was running out of time to stop them.

Chapter 17

Dapplepaw hadn't mean to eavesdrop.

She had only been passing Thunderstar's den on her way to grab a quick meal before heading on a patrol when voices drifted through the entrance, stopping her in her tracks. She recognized Shadestep's deep, measured tone instantly, his voice calm yet unwavering in conviction. Something about the way he spoke made her paws root ot the ground before she could think better of it.

"She's ready, Thunderstar," her mentor said, firm yet composed. "Dapplepaw has proven herself time and time again. She's been an apprentice far longer than most and has skills to match even the most senior warriors. She deserves her warrior assessment and her warrior name."

Dapplepaw's breath caught in her throat at the unexpected praise from her stoic mentor. Shadestep thought she was ready?

Her chest swelled with anticipation, excitement buzzing beneath her pelt. This was what she had been working toward for moons—every sleepless night spent training, every wound she bore for StormClan, every battle fought with unwavering resolve. If Shadestep believed she was ready, then surely—

A silence stretched inside the den, thick and suffocating. It dragged on long enough that Dapplepaw almost convinced herself she had misheard. Then, Thunderstar's voice shattered the stillness likes claws raking through dry leaves.

"She's capable," he admitted at last, though his tone held none of the warmth she had hoped for. "But capability isn't everything."

The warmth in Dapplepaw's chest turned cold.

Shadestep exhaled slowly, the sound carrying the weight of moons of patience. "You still don't trust her," he stated, no question in his

voice.

"I don't." The bluntness of Thunderstar's reply sent a sharp pang through Dapplepaw's ribs. There wasn't even hesitation.

She edged closer, ears straining forward.

"She's met with an enemy clan cat," Thunderstar continued, his voice edged with something almost like disdain. "She sticks her nose where it doesn't belong, always pushing, always challenging. I don't doubt her skill, but I will not name her a warrior until I can be sure of her loyalty."

Loyalty?

Dapplepaw stiffened, her claws sinking into the damp earth beneath her. Was he serious? After everything she had done? She had fought for this Clan, bled for it. She was risking her life for the clan. She had never hesitated in her choice to protect her clanmates. And yet, here Thunderstar was, speaking of her as if she were some traitor lurking in the shadows.

Shadestep was quiet for a moment before he spoke again, carefully measured. "Curiosity isn't a crime."

"Maybe not," Thunderstar allowed, but his voice carried no room for doubt. "But in times like these, curiosity is dangerous."

Dapplepaw felt her breath hitch. She had known Thunderstar was wary of her, had seen the way his sharp eyes lingered on her for too long in Clan meetings, the way his tail twitched whenever she voiced her opinions too boldly. But she had never realized the depth of his distrust—not until now.

It was never going to be enough.

No matter how hard she fought, no matter how much she sacrificed, Thunderstar would always see her as a threat.

A hot wave of frustration burned through her veins, and without thinking, she turned sharply, stalking away before she could hear anything else. She didn't need to.

She had heard enough.

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Dapplepaw stormed across the camp, her claws sinking deep into the earth with every furious step. Her surroundings blurred into meaningless shapes and colors—she barely registered the familiar scents of her Clanmates, the crisp tang of leaf-fall in the air, or the low murmur of conversation drifting from the warriors' den. None of it mattered. Not when her mind was consumed by the words she had just overheard.

She sticks her nose where it doesn't belong.
I need to be sure of her loyalty.

The weight of Thunderstar's voice pressed down on her, suffocating the flicker of hope she had carried in her chest. It had been foolish to think she could ever earn his trust. She hadn't even realized how much she had *wanted* his approval until she learned, without a shadow of a doubt, that she would never have it.

Her paws carried her forward before she even knew where she was going, her breath coming in short, sharp bursts. Then, she spotted Sootfur.

He was sprawled near the warriors' den, his dark fur warm in the dappled sunlight, golden eyes half-lidded in lazy contentment. His tail flicked idly, his posture relaxed—the complete opposite of the raging storm inside her.

Dapplepaw didn't hesitate. She marched straight to him, dropping down beside him with a forceful *thump* and letting out a frustrated huff.

"I'm never going to be a warrior."

Sootfur barely had time to lift his head before she spat the words. He blinked, slow and unhurried, his usual carefree expression shifting to something more curious. "What?"

"Thunderstar doesn't trust me," she growled, her claws digging into the earth. "Shadestep told him I'm ready for my assessment, but he

won't let me take it because he still thinks I'm a threat. After everything I've done—after everything I am risking."

Sootfur flicked his tail thoughtfully, eyes clouded with sympathy. "That's harsh."

"It's more than harsh—it's *wrong*." Dapplepaw's voice rose with frustration. "I've fought for this Clan just as hard as any other apprentice. Harder, even! I've put my life on the line more times than I can count, and yet he still looks at me like I'm some kind of *problem*."

She could feel her breath quickening, her chest tightening as the weight of it all pressed down on her. The anger, the injustice, the sheer *helplessness* of it—she wanted to claw something, to sink her teeth into the nearest moss-covered rock and shake it like an enraged fox.

Sootfur studied her for a moment, his gaze unreadable. Then, with a sudden, fluid motion, he pushed himself to his paws and stretched, his muscles rippling beneath his sleek pelt. Without a word, he flicked her shoulder with his tail.

"Come on."

Dapplepaw blinked, thrown off by the sudden shift. "Where?"

"Out," Sootfur said simply. "You need to let some of that rage out before you claw someone's ears off." His mouth curled into a smirk. "Might as well take it out on me instead."

She hesitated, torn between her frustration and the idea of letting it boil over into something tangible. The last thing she wanted was company right now, but the fire in her chest needed somewhere to go—*needed* an outlet. Pacing the camp like a caged fox wasn't going to help. Picking a fight with Sootfur, however...

Her tail flicked once. "Fine."

Sootfur led them to a secluded clearing near the riverbank, where the ground was soft with moss and fallen leaves. The air was thick with the scent of water and the faint trickle of the river nearby.

Once they arrived, he turned to face her, rolling his shoulders before dropping into a loose, playful crouch.

"All right," he said, his golden eyes gleaming mischievously. "Hit me."

Dapplepaw narrowed her eyes. "What?"

"You're mad, right?" Sootfur said, tail flicking lazily. "So take it out on me."

She didn't need to be told twice.

With a surge of pent-up frustration, she lunged. Her claws were sheathed, but the force of her tackle sent Sootfur stumbling back a step. He recovered quickly, ducking under her next swipe and aiming a light blow at her legs. She twisted midair, barely dodging the strike, and rammed her shoulder into his side.

They tumbled through the leaves, the world blurring around them as their paws collided. The air filled with the sound of their panting, the soft thud of bodies against mossy earth, the rustling of disturbed undergrowth.

For a while, there were no words—only movement, only instinct. Dapplepaw struck, ducked, countered, throwing herself into the fight with everything she had. Every swing of her paw, every dodge, every impact against Sootfur's solid frame sent another wave of anger melting away.

Sootfur was fast—faster than she had expected. He danced just out of reach, dodging most of her blows with ease but never letting her get too far ahead. It was only when she overextended, lashing out too wide, that he darted forward, his weight slamming into her side and knocking her clean off her paws.

She hit the ground with a *huff*, breath coming in ragged pants as she stared up at the sky.

For a moment, she just lay there, her chest rising and falling, her limbs feeling loose and worn in a way that had nothing to do with exhaustion.

Sootfur flopped down beside her, equally breathless, his golden eyes shining with quiet amusement. "Feel better?"

Dapplepaw exhaled slowly, the fire inside her dimmed to embers. "A little."

Sootfur turned his head to look at her, something softer in his gaze now. "For what it's worth, you're already a warrior to me. Thunderstar's just too stubborn to see it." The young warrior then leaned over to give her forehead a quick lick before returning to his spot.

Something in Dapplepaw's chest tightened—not with frustration, but with something else entirely. A flicker of warmth, of gratitude. She turned her gaze to the sky, letting the cool night air wash over her.

"Thanks, Sootfur."

A comfortable silence settled between them. The river murmured nearby, the wind whispered through the trees, and for the first time in what felt like moons, Dapplepaw let herself *breathe*.

Then, after a long pause, Sootfur spoke again, softer this time. "You'll get your name, Dapplepaw. And when you do, Thunderstar will have no choice but to see what the rest of us already know."

Dapplepaw stared up at the stars, the fire in her chest still burning —but now, steadier.

She would make sure of it.

Chapter 18

Dapplepaw continued her training as expected, despite Thunderstar's refusal to grant her warrior's assessment. She hunted for her Clan, patrolled the borders, and sharpened her skills like any apprentice should. To an outsider, she was just another young warrior in the making, dutiful and disciplined. She had Sootfur to thank for keeping her sane amidst the chaos. His easy-going nature balanced out the turmoil stirring within her.

However, the unease never truly left her.

She was keenly aware of the hushed conversations that flowed through the camp, led by Smokefoot, sometimes ending abruptly when she got too close. She had even begun to notice the way Oakfoot, who had once warned her to be careful, refused to meet her gaze whenever their paths crossed at the border. She told herself that it was merely the rising tensions between their Clans keeping him at a distance, but a part of her couldn't shake the feeling that something else was at play. PineClan had always been an unpredictable presence, but there was something in Oakfoot's avoidance that felt personal.

Shaking her head to clear her thoughts, she forced herself to focus on the present. She was on a border patrol. It was her duty to remain alert, to keep her Clan safe, not to dwell on uncertain suspicions.

She walked alongside her mentor, Shadestep, while Thistletail led the group. Ravenflight padded just behind them, her normally sleek black pelt slightly fuller with the swell of her belly. She still had plenty of time to go before her kits were here and the fierce warrior refused to move to the nursery until it was necessary, insisting she was still capable of contributing to her Clan. Dawncloud, ever wise and gentle, had supported her choice, though Shadestep remained displeased with the decision.

Dapplepaw cast a glance at her mentor, watching the way his ears twitched in irritation as Ravenflight spoke to him in hushed tones. Their bond was clear. She had always respected the way the pairs relationship was solid as stone but not an elaborate display for the entire clan to see.

Thistletail, meanwhile, moved steadily ahead, his movements efficient as he stopped to scrape his claws against the bark of a tree, leaving behind the fresh scent of StormClan.

Dapplepaw slowed her pace, ears pricked as she tasted the air.

Pine needles. Earth. The crisp scent of damp foliage. And beneath it, something that didn't belong.

Her fur bristled before she even saw him.

A figure emerged just beyond the border, his dark pelt nearly blending into the shadows cast by the towering pine trees.

Birchshadow.

Dapplepaw's muscles tensed, but she forced herself to appear indifferent, lowering her head slightly as if focused on her task. With a casual flick of her tail, she dragged her claws through the dirt, mimicking Thistletail's marking.

She could feel Birchshadow watching her.

"StormClan's marking their borders more frequently," his voice was smooth, a deliberate calmness laced beneath the words. "A little excessive, don't you think?"

Thistletail turned, his amber eyes narrowing. "We mark our borders as we see fit," he said gruffly. "Since some cats can't seem to respect them."

A flicker of amusement passed over Birchshadow's face, but it didn't reach his eyes. "We respect the borders just as much as you do."

Dapplepaw felt the weight of his gaze shift toward her again. It was brief—just a fraction of a heartbeat too long.

A silent message.

Shadestep stepped forward, his body angled protectively. "Why are you here, Birchshadow?"

Birchshadow's tail twitched slightly. "Passing through," he said lightly. "Routine check. Just as you're doing."

Ravenflight snorted. "Without a patrol?" Her tone was dry, a clear challenge.

Shadestep shot her a warning look before shaking his head. "Let's keep moving."

Thistletail took the lead once more, Ravenflight and Shadestep following. Dapplepaw turned to go, but a voice halted her.

"Dapplepaw."

Her name, spoken so smoothly, so deliberately, froze her paws before she even realized it.

She should have ignored him. She should have walked away.

But instead, she turned her head just enough to meet his gaze.

"Birchshadow."

Shadestep cast a sharp glance back at her, his expression unreadable. She knew he didn't want her engaging with the PineClan deputy. And yet... she needed to know what he wanted.

Hoping her mentor would trust her, she met his gaze steadily and said, "I'll catch up."

Shadestep hesitated, clearly about to argue. She expected him to snap at her, to force her to keep moving. But to her surprise, he gave a curt nod. "Wrap it up quickly."

Warmth flickered in her chest. Trust. Maybe this was the start of mending the rift between them.

She turned fully toward Birchshadow as the patrol continued without her.

Now, it was just the two of them.

For a long moment, neither of them spoke.

Then—

"You need to stop."

His voice was quiet, almost bored, but Dapplepaw wasn't fooled.

She forced herself to remain relaxed, though every instinct screamed at her to stay on guard. "Stop what?" she asked, feigning innocence.

Birchshadow exhaled softly, shaking his head. "Don't insult me," he murmured. "We both know you've been sniffing around in places you shouldn't."

Dapplepaw's claws pressed into the dirt. "If that were true," she said coolly, "then wouldn't it be my business?"

A slow smile curled at the edges of Birchshadow's muzzle. Not friendly. Not amused.

A warning.

"You're bold," he said. "But boldness alone won't save you."

"And neither will your lies."

The words left her before she could stop them. A direct challenge.

For the first time, Birchshadow's expression darkened—just for a heartbeat.

Then, just as quickly, it smoothed over, unreadable once more.

He stepped forward, slow and deliberate. The scent of PineClan filled her nose, but she didn't flinch, even as he came close enough for his whiskers to brush the air near hers.

"You don't know what you're up against," he murmured.

This time, there was no teasing lilt. No mock amusement.

Just quiet certainty.

Dapplepaw swallowed against the tightness in her throat, but she refused to break eye contact.

"If that were true," she whispered, "you wouldn't be warning me."

For a fleeting moment, something flickered in his gaze. A shift. A calculation.

Then, just as suddenly as he had appeared, he took a step back.

"You should learn when to walk away."

Dapplepaw said nothing.

Because she wasn't walking away.

Not now. Not ever.

With one last unreadable glance, Birchshadow turned, his dark form slipping back into the shadows of PineClan's territory. Within moments, he was gone, as if he had never been there at all.

Only the scent of pine needles remained.

Dapplepaw exhaled slowly, barely realizing how tense her muscles had been.

He wanted her to doubt. To hesitate. To fear.

She wouldn't give him the satisfaction.

With a quick shake of her fur, she turned and sprinted after her patrol, wondering if Shadestep would question her about the conversation.

And wondering what she would tell him.

Chapter 19

Dapplepaw wrinkled her nose as she hooked out a clump of stale moss from Stormwhisper's nest. The scent of old bedding clung to her fur—a musty mix of damp earth, elder fur, and the faint, sour tang of old herbs. She grimaced as a thorn pricked her paw and flicked the soiled moss aside with more force than necessary, frustration building beneath her skin. Her claws ached to be doing something useful—hunting, tracking, sparring—anything other than scraping out nests for a grumpy elder but reminded herself quietly and firmly that this was just as important as any other duty for a clan cat.

Stormwhisper shifted with a wince, her bones creaking like old tree branches in the wind. "You're taking too long," she groused, gray-streaked fur bristling. "My bones will turn to dust before you finish fluffing a bit of moss."

Dapplepaw exhaled through her nose, pushing a new bundle toward the elder with firm, precise paws. "Maybe if you stopped wriggling like a tick-ridden kit, I'd be done by now."

The older she-cat snorted, but there was amusement in her narrowed eyes. "In my day, apprentices didn't talk back. We had discipline. Respect."

"In your day, did they also refuse to sleep in the same nest twice because 'the wind shifted wrong'?" Dapplepaw retorted, her voice tinged with dry humor as she adjusted the last wad of moss.

Stormwhisper gave her a look—part scolding, part grudging approval. "Watch that sharp tongue, young one. One day, you'll be the cranky elder, and some fresh-faced apprentice will be grumbling over your nest."

"As if," Dapplepaw said with a scoff, standing and stretching her stiff legs. "By then, I'll be leading border patrols, chasing off foxes, or battling rogues—not lazing around camp all day."

The elder's expression changed in an instant. Her ears twitched back slightly, and the teasing faded from her voice like mist under the sun. "You think that's what being a warrior means? Fighting? Barking orders? Chasing glory?"

Dapplepaw hesitated, her whiskers twitching. She hadn't meant to upset the elder. She was just trying to joke with her but. Dapplepaw was well aware that a warrior was more than just fighting and glory. She'd do anything but fight, if she was being honest. With a sigh Dapplepaw replied, "No, but—someone has to protect the Clan. We can't just let other cats walk all over us."

"A battle doesn't just take a toll on your body," Stormwhisper murmured, her voice low and distant, as if drawn from some place far removed from the present. Her eyes, usually clouded by age, gleamed now with a fire that hadn't quite died. "It weighs on your spirit too. The day will come when you'll understand that."

Dapplepaw opened her mouth to respond, to offer some half-hearted quip, but something in the elder's tone froze the words in her throat. A strange chill ran along her spine. Stormwhisper wasn't just reminiscing.

She was warning her.

And then the air cracked apart.

A yowl—sharp, jagged, *wrong*—sliced through the night like a claw to the belly.

Dapplepaw spun around, fur bristling.

Sootfur burst into the clearing like a shadow dragged through thorns. His flanks heaved, foam at the corners of his mouth, and blood—*StarClan*, there was *so much blood*—splattered down his side and soaked his white paws.

Her heart lurched. "Sootfur!" she gasped, and in that moment, the world shrank down to that one image: the tom she cared deeply for, broken and bleeding. She couldn't breathe. Her legs refused to move.

Was it all his blood? How was he still standing?

Panic clamped around her chest like a vice.

"PineClan attacked us at Silver Falls!" he rasped, eyes wild, the whites flashing in the moonlight. "We were ambushed and outnumbered! It's bad! We need help *now!*"

Dapplepaw felt herself go cold. *No... No, Oakfoot said this would happen. He warned me.* She'd known the tension was building—seen the signs—and yet she had done nothing. *I should have spoken up. Should have gone to Someone. Anyone. I should have—*

"Shadestep, Smokefoot, Thistletail, Dapplepaw! With me!" Thunderstar's command thundered through the clearing. "We move now!"

The world snapped back into motion.

She bolted after the others, paws flying over the stone and root-laced forest floor. Her lungs burned with each breath, but her fear outpaced her exhaustion. Her mind buzzed with frantic, unfinished thoughts.

Is Sootfur okay? Who else was on the patrol? Who's already—no. Don't think that. Keep running. Just keep running.

The roar of Silver Falls grew louder, no longer the soothing background hum she had grown up with—it was a *war cry now*, a thunderous dirge echoing through the trees. The air reeked of blood and PineClan musk.

Then they broke through the underbrush.

And the world turned red.

The clearing was a battlefield drenched in moonlight and misery. Warriors tangled like shadows locked in mortal struggle, their cries lost beneath the pounding waterfall. Rocks were slick with blood. Screams echoed off the stone.

Dapplepaw's breath caught.

Mistfeather was slashing at a warrior with crazed eyes and blood trailing from her torn ear. Her movements were wild, desperate, but slowing.

Cinderclaw fought like a storm, fending off three PineClan cats with terrifying precision—but even she faltered, her haunches soaked in crimson.

And—

"Shadowpaw!" Dapplepaw choked on the name.

Near the waterfall, her friend fought furiously, a streak of black and gray battling a warrior twice his size. His movements were fast—so fast—but frenzied. His opponent toyed with him, driving him back. Closer. Closer to the edge.

And overseeing it all—

Birchshadow.

The PineClan deputy stood motionless amidst the bloodshed, his amber eyes shining with cold satisfaction. He didn't fight. He didn't *need* to. His warriors did it for him—cutting StormClan down one cat at a time.

Dapplepaw's chest exploded with fury.

You don't get to stand there and watch us fall.

With a scream of pure rage, she hurled herself into the battle.

She slammed into a warrior bearing down on Sootfur, her claws finding flesh, her momentum knocking them sprawling. The tom beneath her shrieked, but she didn't stop. She drove her claws into his flank and flung herself away just as another warrior charged.

A blur of fangs and claws met her.

Dapplepaw twisted, ducked beneath a swipe, and slashed upward, catching her attacker's throat. He stumbled back, yowling, but she didn't pause—didn't *think*. She became what Stormwhisper had

warned her about.

A weapon.

And she *hated* it.

She fought like her body was no longer her own—faster than she thought possible, dodging, striking, rolling, leaping. But with every blow landed, a new part of her soul seemed to scream in protest.

Is this who I'm meant to become?

To her left, Thistletail let out a victorious roar as he sent a PineClan warrior sprawling. To her right, Mistfeather was knocked into the rocks, crumpling with a cry that made Dapplepaw's blood run cold.

They were *losing*.

They were being *slaughtered*.

And then—*the scream.*

Everything stopped.

Her ears pricked, her blood turned to ice.

Shadowpaw.

She spun toward the sound and saw it—his small form lying at the edge of the falls, one foreleg twisted beneath him, his fur soaked and lifeless.

No. No. No.

"*Shadowpaw!*" she shrieked, voice cracking, and launched toward him.

But fate struck first.

A PineClan warrior rammed into her side, and the world flipped upside down. She hit the water like a stone.

Cold.

Freezing.

Dark.

She fought the current, kicked and clawed her way to the surface, gasping, coughing, dragging herself onto the slippery rocks.

She looked upmand saw Smokefoot standing beside Shadowpaw.

Not moving. Not helping. Just watching. And then—*a nod.* Small. Almost imperceptible. But Birchshadow's eyes met his, and Dapplepaw's heart plunged into her stomach.

No.

She didn't have time to think—couldn't afford to. Another PineClan warrior charged her and she reacted on instinct. She met them mid-leap, claws slashing, teeth snapping, fury burning through her like wildfire.

This is for him!

She struck again and again until they fled, leaving behind streaks of blood and torn fur.

Then—

"*Retreat, StormClan!*" Thunderstar's voice rang out, ragged and full of bitter defeat. "*Retreat—now!*"

What?

She froze. Retreat? After this? After what they lost?

But her eyes fell on Shadowpaw again—still. Silent. Gone.

Sootfur reached him, whispering, pleading, nudging his limp body. "Get up," he begged. "Please, get up..."

Mistfeather stumbled beside them, her face contorted with grief. She pressed her ear to Shadowpaw's chest.

And then she whispered, "He's gone."

Everything fell silent inside Dapplepaw.

The yowls around her dulled. The blood on her fur went cold. The pain in her limbs became distant.

Nothing made sense.

PineClan yowled in triumph as StormClan pulled back, dragging their wounded and their dead.

She moved without thinking, staggering after Sootfur, who helped lift Shadowpaw's body between them. Each step was agony. The grief clung to her like brambles.

StormClan hadn't just lost Silver Falls.

They had lost *Shadowpaw.*

And somewhere deep inside her, Dapplepaw knew this was only the beginning.

Chapter 20

A terrible stillness blanketed StormClan's camp, thick as fog and twice as heavy. It hung in the air like the breath before a storm. Except no storm came. The wind had vanished, and even the stars above were hidden behind a veil of low, bruised clouds. Not a sound was heard. The mountain terrain, like the clan, had fallen into silent mourning.

The camp, once alive with chatter and paws was not a graveyard of wounded cats and shattered hearts. Silver Falls was no longer a part of their home. It was just a battleground. The stench of blood and herbs mingled in the cold air, thick enough to tase. Crushed most nests were scattered like feathers after a fight. Stones, once dappled in moonlight, now bore long streaks of red from injured cats making their way into camp. Cries of pain had quieted to groans and hope had been replaced with a gnawing hush.

Dawncloud moved like a phantom through the wreckage—her cream-colored pelt smeared with blood, though not her own. Her once-groomed fur was matted, her tail dragging. She had not stopped, not even to clean herself. There was no time for vanity now. Her eyes, soft by nature, were dulled by exhaustion and pain, and every pawstep seemed to carry the weight of every wound she'd tended that night.

"Hold still, Thistletail," she said, voice as brittle as the windblown leaves during a harsh leaf0fall. She pressed marigold against a torn patch of flesh on his shoulder.

The golden-brown tom flinched, biting back a hiss, his eyes distant —staring at something only he could see. He gave no complaint as if he had learned to suffer in silence.

Across the clearing, Shadestep leaned heavily against the stone wall near the entrance of camp, his black pelt sticky with blood seeping from a long gash along his flank. Ravenflight stood guard beside him, unusually quiet, her sleek black tail lashing in the dirt as her

eyes darted around camp.

Something had changed within StormClan.

At the edge of the clearing, Dapplepaw lingered near the medicine den, her small body swaying with exhaustion. Her dappled fur was torn and stained, bruises blooming beneath the surface like storm clouds. She didn't remember being struck in some of the places that throbbed now. Her limbs trembled as she watched Dawncloud work, unable to will herself forward.

Until the medicine cat turned toward her and gave the faintest of nods. A gesture of both summons and comfort.

"I'm fine," Dapplepaw muttered, but her body betrayed her. Her legs buckling forward without command. Her breath caught in her throat as she stumbled across the den and collapsed onto a bed of moss. The sharp pain that flared along her ribs made her eyes sting.

Dawncloud crouched beside her, gentle but firm. "Deep bruising. You've got a nasty scrape here too. It needs cleaning."

The touch of the cool poultice against her side made Dapplepaw flinch. Her breath hitched. "I should've seen them coming," she said hoarsely. "If I'd just fought harder... If I'd turned faster..."

"Don't," Dawncloud snapped—not unkindly, but with a strength that startled even herself. "You fought like a warrior. That's all anyone could ask."

"But Shadowpaw—" The name caught in Dapplepaw's throat like thorns. Her voice broke. "He was right there. He was *alive*—and then he wasn't."

Dawncloud didn't answer right away. Her paws moved in practiced silence, binding cobweb to skin. When she spoke again, her voice was lower. "Grieve him. You should. But do not blame yourself. That path leads to nothing but shadow, and you're not meant to live there."

Dapplepaw looked down, ashamed. Her shoulders shook with silent

sobs. "Where's Sootfur?" she asked at last, her voice barely audible.

Dawncloud's expression shifted—sympathy etched into every line. "He's inside. Still unconscious, mostly. Took a bad hit."

A cold rush of fear surged through Dapplepaw. She rose shakily and followed the she-cat deeper into the den. The scent of yarrow and blood grew stronger as they approached a moss nest tucked into the shadows. There, Sootfur lay motionless—his dark gray-black fur dulled with dust and sweat. A splint bound his hind leg, bark lashed with long grass, and his side was wrapped in sticky cobwebs stained a deep rust-red.

His breathing was shallow. Labored. But it was still there.

"Sootfur..." she whispered.

At her voice, his ears twitched. Slowly, his eyes cracked open—yellow-green, dazed and glossy with pain.

"D... Dapplepaw?" he rasped, barely audible.

"I'm here," she murmured, crouching beside him, brushing her tail gently along his cheek.

His eyes searched her face, confused at first... then terrified. "Is Shadowpaw really gone?"

Her silence was answer enough and she watch Sootfur nodded slowly as if she had spoken, "I should be sitting vigil with him." He went to get up and Dapplepaw quickly, and gently pushed him back into his nest.

"You need to heal," she said, her voice growing firm. "Shadowpaw wouldn't want you to break yourself trying to sit vigil for him."

His jaw clenched. He turned his face away, eyes burning. "But.."

Dapplepaw pressed her muzzle to his cheek. "I'll sit with him for the both us."

He didn't answer. But his tail gave a faint flick, brushing hers. And

that was enough.

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The clearing had become a sacred place now.

Under the weight of the stars, Shadowpaw's body lay still and serene beneath the open sky. His dark fur had been washed and smoothed, his wounds gently covered. His paws were tucked beneath his chest, his tail curled by his side.

Cinderclaw wept beside him. The once fierce and sharp-tongued she-cat, now just a mother mourning her kit. Her body trembled as she pressed her muzzle into Shadowpaw's fur.

Dapplepaw stopped, frozen by the sound of the raw grief. Her heart, already bruised, seemed to crack.

"I should've never asked you to join our patrol,"Cinderclaw sobbed. "I should have protected you better."

She bent forward, pressing her nose deeper into his fur as if she could will him warm again. Dawncloud padded past Dapplepaw, approached Cinderclaw quietly. She coaxed her back with a gentle nudge. Initially, Cinderclaw resisted but then yielded, letting herself be led away.

Dapplepaw took her place beside Shadowpaw, blinking hard to force back tears. She stared down at him, her mind echoing with memories—his laugh, the flick of his tail when teasing, his crooked grin when he'd catch her staring. She willed herself to remember that, not this.

Behind her, voices stirred.

"We should have struck first," growled Thistletail, his claws gouging the earth. "We knew PineClan was messing around near the border. Thunderstar knew and he waited."

"He refused to listen," Cinderclaw said through her sorrow as Dawncloud tended to her wounds that were still bleeding. "We lost Shadowpaw. Not just Silver Falls," Cinderclaw snarled her eyes

glaring across the clearing to Thunderstar who sat like a stone beanth Jagged's Peak, his face carved in shadow. He said nothing. The silence was it owns kind of answer.

Dapplepaw turned away. Frustration prickling her pelt. *We should be mourning Shadowpaw not putting blame on anyone.*

Then she felt a shift in the air. A presence at her side.

Smokefoot.

He sat down silently, his posture calm, his dark gray fur unruffled. His eyes flicking towards Shadowpaw and then toward her.

Dapplepaw didn't look at him. But she heard his whisper.

"Let this be a warning, Dapplepaw."

She stiffened, every hair on her body rising.

"You've been looking too closely," he murmured. "If you keep digging, more cats will suffer. Is that what you want?"

Her claws sank into the soil and she whipped her head to face him, eyes blazing.

"He was your son." She hissed.

"You're smart," he said, rising to his paws. "Stay that way."

And just like that, he was gone, disappearing into the sea of mourners like mist between the trees.

Dapplepaw didn't move.

The pounding of her heart drowned out everything else.

Fear... no longer held her.

Only fury.

Author's Note

Thank you so much for reading!! I hope you've enjoyed the first book in the *Storm of Shadows* Trilogy just as much as I've enjoyed writing it. As with any piece of writing, there are parts here and there that I feel I could have written better but I am proud of what was published nonetheless.

Some exciting news is that this story has been entered in the "Where Light Follows (A Warriors Fanfic Comp)" under the "Best Original Clan Story" category hosted by Brihorse123!!

I've never entered a writing competition so I figured I should give it a shot with a story I hold so close to my heart.

I will be taking a brief break before diving into book two, but don't worry! I will be publishing a warrior cats short story within the next week or so as sort of like an intermission. I do have two warrior cat short story drafts one is a romance and the other is more of a character study... if you have a preference on which one you would like to see, let me know!

Stay Tuned for...
Warriors: The Awakening Storm #2
Coming Late May / Early June 2025!